ASPEN SHOWCASE

Vince HERNANDEZ Sana TAKEDA

GRACE

#1

aspen comics

ASPEN SHOWCASE

Vince HERNANDEZ Sana TAKEDA

GRACE

#1

aspen comics

Grace

Writer:
Vince Hernandez

Illustrations:
Sana Takeda

Letters:
Josh Reed

Aspen Showcase

Cover A:
Sana Takeda

Cover B:
Marcus To
Saleem Crawford
Beth Sotelo

Cover C:
WonderCon 2008
Exclusive Limited
Edition of 2000
Michael Turner
Peter Steigerwald

Cover D:
WWLA 2008 V.I.P.
Edition of 1500
Michael Turner
Peter Steigerwald

For Aspen: Founder: Michael Turner Co-Owner: Peter Steigerwald Co-Owner/President: Frank Mastromauro
Vice President/Editor in Chief: Vince Hernandez Vice President/Design and Production: Mark Roslan
Editor: Gabe Carrasco Office Manager: Megan Madrigal Editorial Intern: Mexi Gramillion Production: Justice AspenStore.com: Chris Rupp

Editors: Frank Mastromauro with Josh Reed, Design and Production: Mark Roslan with Peter Steigerwald

Soulfire Created By: Michael Turner, Original Lettering Font By: Dreamer Design

ASPEN SHOWCASE: GRACE Vol. 1 Issue 1 APRIL 2017. DIGITAL COPY. Published by Aspen MLT, Inc., Office of Publication: 5701 W. Slauson Ave. Suite. 120, Culver City, CA 90230. The Aspen MLT, Inc. logo® is a registered trademark of Aspen MLT, Inc. Aspen Showcase™ and the Aspen Showcase logo are the trademarks of Aspen MLT, Inc. The entire contents of this book, all artwork, characters and their likenesses are © 2017 Aspen MLT, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Any similarities between names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with persons living or dead or institutions is unintended and is purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted, reproduced or transmitted by any means or in any form without the express written consent of Aspen MLT, Inc.

Visit us on the web at WWW.ASPENCOMICS.COM

The age of magic-- or rather, my age of magic occurred so long ago, the faces of my loved ones seem like a distant memory.
It happens when years turn to centuries and I am all that remains.
I've endlessly followed the traces of what I believed were signs of the return of magic. Epic battles, power struggles, elements which go hand-in-hand with the return of the light.
The end result is always the same...

I ONLY FIND TROUBLE.

THE CRUSADES, 1174.

FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME, I COULDN'T ACCEPT THE FACT THAT MY WINGS WERE GONE. I DIDN'T WANT TO LIVE LIKE A NORMAL HUMAN.
THOUGH I QUICKLY CAME TO REALIZE...
HYAAA!
WOMAN, RELEASE THE GRAIL FROM YOUR GRASP OR FACE IMMINENT DEATH!
HRAAH!
I WILL NEVER BE NORMAL.

WHAT KIND OF WRETCHED SORCERER *ARE YOU?!?*
I AM *NO* SORCERER. I'M A RAHTUMI. AND *YOU* GAVE CHASE TO ME!
WHATEVER FORM OF *EVIL* YOU ARE, THE *HOLY GRAIL* IS A SACRED OBJECT OF FAITH. RETURN IT *HENCEFORTH!*
THIS OLD PIECE?
I HIGHLY DOUBT THIS DISH SHOULD BE AN OBJECT WORTHY OF YOUR *UNDYING CONVICTION.*

HERE.
I HAD HEARD MUMBLINGS OF THE ARRIVAL OF STRANGE OCCURRENCES ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR DISH, I THOUGHT IT WAS THE RETURN OF SOMETHING... DEAR TO ME.
BUT THIS IS RELIGIOUS FANATICISM.
HEY! GET BACK HERE, WOMAN!
LOOK TO YOUR MEN...
I'D SUGGEST YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF LUCKY I GAVE YOU BACK YOUR DINNERWARE.

I'VE LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO FORGET CENTURIES ALTOGETHER, YET RETAINED MORE INFORMATION THAN ANY MORTAL COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE.
I'VE TRAINED IN EVERY ART IMAGINABLE.
I'VE PARTAKEN IN EVERY PLEASURE THIS PLANET HAS TO OFFER.

I'VE FOLLOWED EVERY LEAD I THOUGHT SIGNALED THE RETURN OF MAGIC--ONLY TO FIND SOME FORM OF LAMENTABLE IDOLATRY.
AND I'VE SUFFERED THROUGH LOSING EVERY PERSON I'VE EVER CARED FOR.
YET ONE CONSTANT'S REMAINED--THRIVED EVEN--AS I WAITED FOR MY WINGS TO RETURN. ONE RELENTLESS ELEMENT MIRRORING THE AGE OF MAGIC...
SWOLLEN TO THE BREAKING POINT...

TECHNOLOGY.

WIELUN, POLAND
SEPTEMBER 1ST, 1939

TO TRULY UNDERSTAND THE AGE-OLD RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAGIC AND TECHNOLOGY, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO REALIZE THE INHERENT NATURE OF BOTH.
MAGIC IS AN ELEMENTAL FORCE.
A DOMINATING FORCE. DURING THE AGE OF MAGIC, THOSE BORN WITHOUT THE WILL TO WIELD IT ALWAYS STRIVED TO REACH THE LEVELS OF THOSE WHO POSSESSED IT.
TECHNOLOGY GREW FROM THIS ENVY.
BOTH CREATURES OF MAGIC AND MORTAL HAVE ALWAYS SOUGHT TO CONTROL ONE ANOTHER--EVEN THEIR OWN KIND IF THE OPPORTUNITY ARISES. CONFLICT BECAME THE ONLY INDICATOR I HAD TO SIGNAL THE RETURN OF THE LIGHT.
<MOVE! MOVE!>
<HALT!>
<TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN>

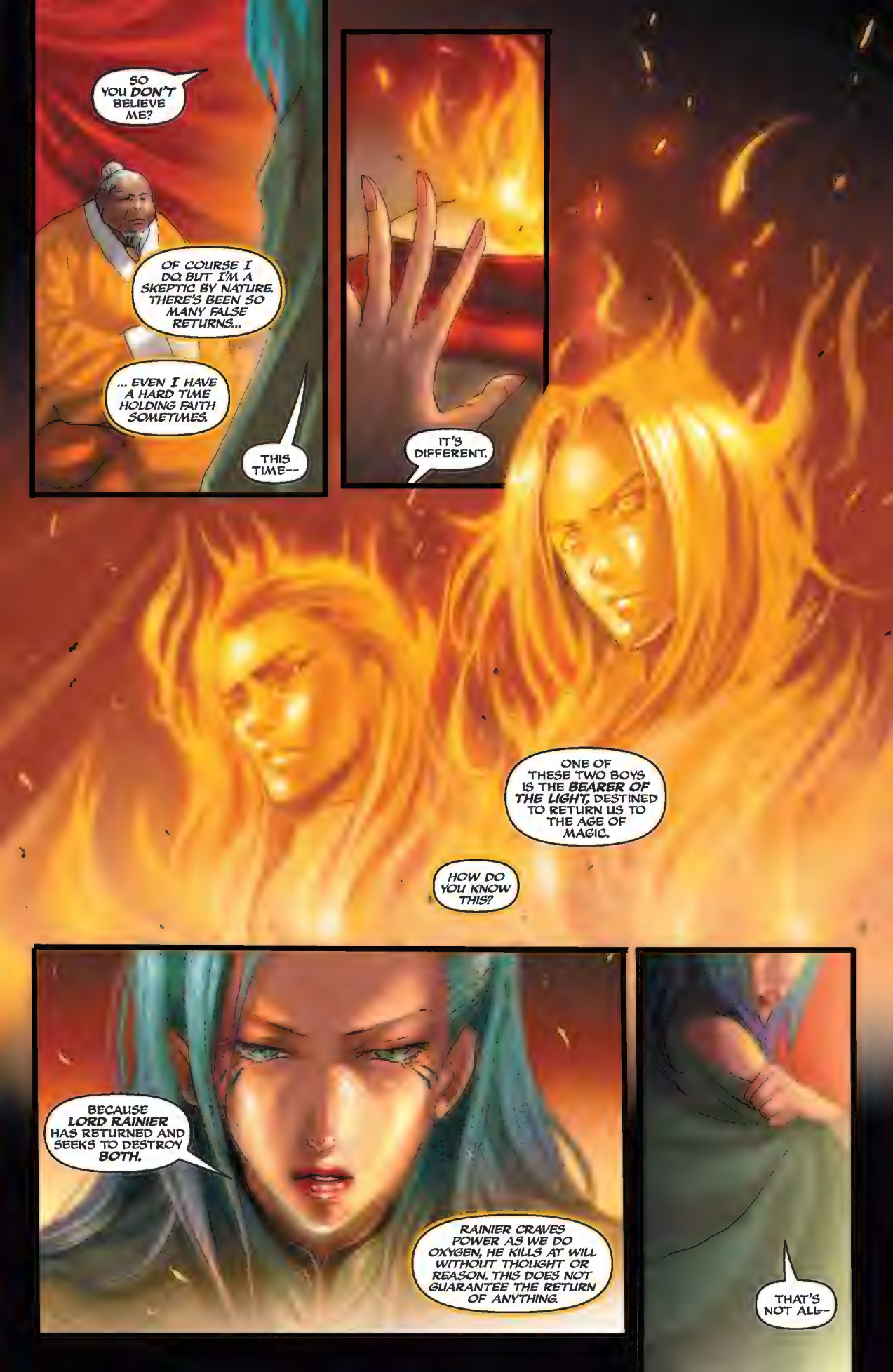
BUT LIKE I SAID, USUALLY ONLY FOUND TROUBLE
<PROCEED TO THE END OF THE LINE GYPSY! YOU AND YOUR POSSESSIONS ARE NOW UNDER THE ORDER OF THE 3RD REICH.>
<I AM NO GYPSY.>
<FIRE!>
<I'M A RAHTUMI.>
AHHHHHH!

<SHOOT HER/>
THE MORTALS REFERRED TO IT AS A WORLD WAR, BUT I SAW THE GREAT CONFLICT AS SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY.
<DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE/>
BLAM
IT WAS THE MOMENT THE STRENGTH OF TECHNOLOGY SURPASSED THE POWER OF THE IDLE MAGIC.

‹YOU'VE NO RIGHT TO CONTROL THESE PEOPLE!›
BLAM
NO!
ARGGGH!

<GO BACK TO YOUR COMMANDER, TELL THEM THESE PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO THEIR SOVEREIGNTY.>
<THEY HAVE THE RIGHT...>
<...TO LIVE?>
I RARELY INTERVENE IN THEIR MATTERS BECAUSE THEY AREN'T CAPABLE OF COMPREHENDING WHERE I COME FROM.
AND I'M NOT CAPABLE OF TRULY MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR DESTINY.
THEIR FATE RESTS ON A TIMELINE AS DOES MINE

HAWAI'I 2210
IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME.
I SEE YOU'VE ADDED MORE STAIRS SINCE MY LAST VISIT.
IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, KAMEA.
WE'VE MISSED YOUR PRESENCE HERE AS WELL.
COME.


SO YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME?
OF COURSE I DO. BUT I'M A SKEPTIC BY NATURE. THERE'S BEEN SO MANY FALSE RETURNS...
... EVEN I HAVE A HARD TIME HOLDING FAITH SOMETIMES.
THIS TIME--
IT'S DIFFERENT.
ONE OF THESE TWO BOYS IS THE BEARER OF THE LIGHT, DESTINED TO RETURN US TO THE AGE OF MAGIC.
HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS?
BECAUSE LORD RAINIER HAS RETURNED AND SEEKS TO DESTROY BOTH.
RAINIER CRAVES POWER AS WE DO OXYGEN. HE KILLS AT WILL WITHOUT THOUGHT OR REASON. THIS DOES NOT GUARANTEE THE RETURN OF ANYTHING.
THAT'S NOT ALL--

THERE'S THIS.

CAIRO, 2210
ONE CHILD IS THE DIRECT DESCENDANT OF A PHARAOH, THE OTHER AN ORPHAN.
NATURALLY, I TOOK THE CHALLENGE FIRST.
ONCE SETTING MY EYES UPON THE FIRST I DISCERNED...
<STOP SLAVE!>
<TRANSLATED FROM EGYPTIAN ARABIC>
CAIRO, 2210
ONE CHILD IS THE DIRECT DESCENDANT OF A PHARAOH, THE OTHER AN ORPHAN.
NATURALLY, I TOOK THE CHALLENGE FIRST.
ONCE SETTING MY EYES UPON THE FIRST I DISCERNED...
<STOP SLAVE!>
<TRANSLATED FROM EGYPTIAN ARABIC>

HE WAS NO BEARER.
<SLAVE?>
IN ALL THIS TIME, ONE THING ABOUT ME HAS CHANGED. WHEN MY WINGS RETURNED, I STOPPED TELLING PEOPLE WHERE I'VE COME FROM.

AND BEGAN TO SHOW THEM.
<NO! DON'T SHOOT YOUR WEAPONS!>
ARGGGH!
<YOU ARE NO SLAVE! YOU ARE LIKE THE OTHER DEMON--- THE DARK ONE! TELL RAINIER I'LL DIE BEFORE OUR SECTOR YIELDS TO HIS DEMAND!>
<I'M SURE IN DUE TIME YOU WILL.>
<I'M SURE IN DUE TIME YOU WILL.>

CRACK
<BUT IT WON'T BE BY MY HAND.>
<YOU CAN'T JUST WALK AWAY FROM ME!>
<OH DON'T WORRY--I WON'T BE WALKING. YOU DON'T MIND IF I BORROW YOUR TOY?>
WITH THE YOUNG PHARAOH OUT OF THE WAY, THE ANSWER IS CLEAR NOW...

IT IS THE ORPHAN.
END.

ASPEN SHOWCASE

C.B. CEBULSKI Talent CALDWELL John STARR

ASPEN SHOWCASE

C.B. CEBULSKI Talent CALDWELL John STARR

ASPEN

#1

aspen comics

Aspen

Writer:
C.B. Cebulski

Pencils:
Talent Caldwell

Colors:
John Starr

Letters:
Josh Reed

Aspen Showcase

Cover A:
Talent Caldwell
Peter Steigerwald

Cover B:
Ale Garza
John Starr

Cover C:
WWC 2008 V.I.P
Edition of 1500
Michael Turner
Peter Steigerwald

For Aspen: Founder: Michael Turner Co-Owner: Peter Steigerwald Co-Owner/President: Frank Mastromauro
Vice President/Editor in Chief: Vince Hernandez Vice President/Design and Production: Mark Roslan
Editor: Gabe Carbasco Office Manager: Megan Madrigal Editorial Intern: Mexi Graxiellon Production: Justice AspenStore.com: Chris Rupp

Editor: Vince Hernandez, Design and Production: Mark Roslan with Peter Steigerwald

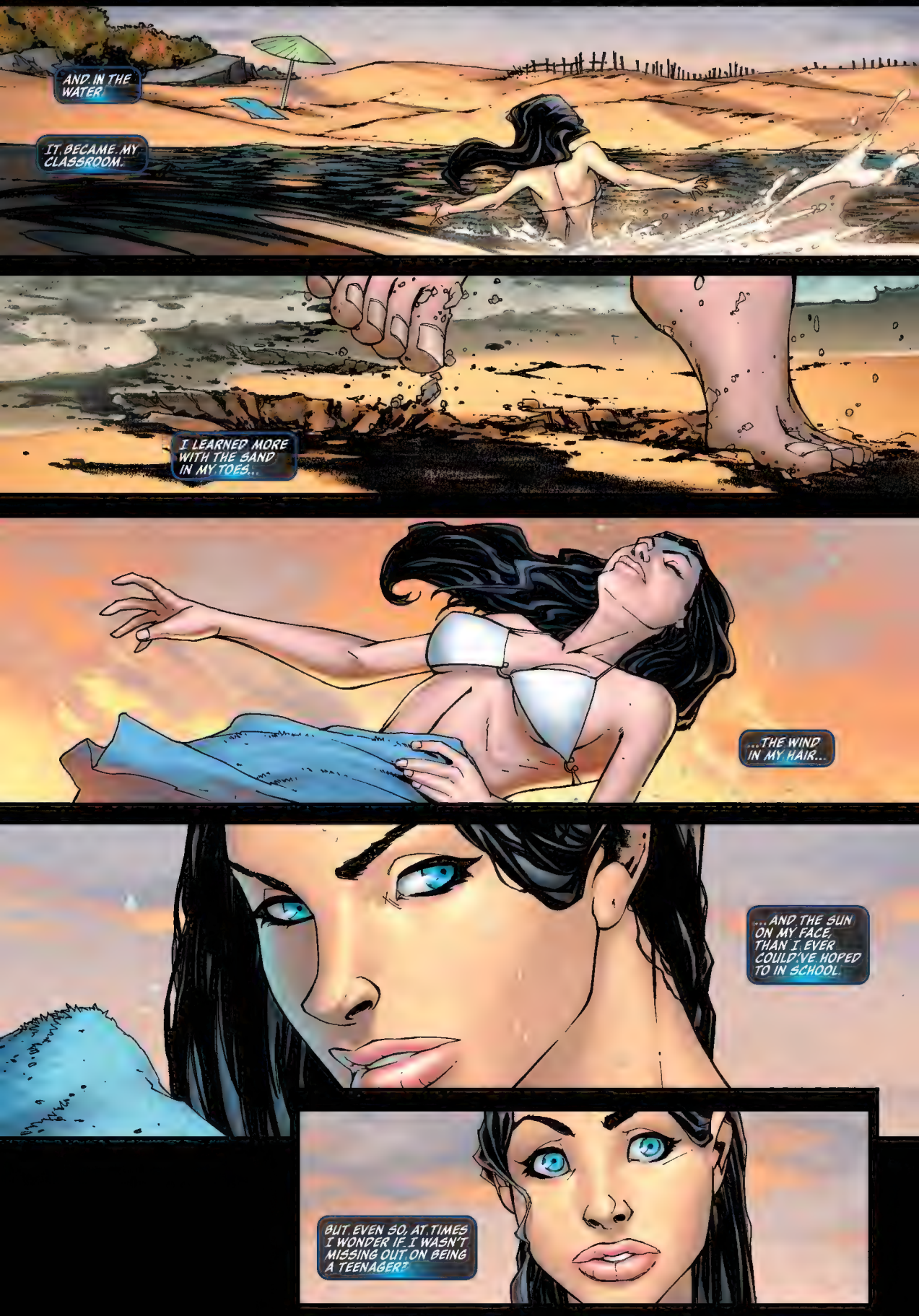
Fathom Created By: Michael Turner, Original Lettering Font By: Dreamer Design

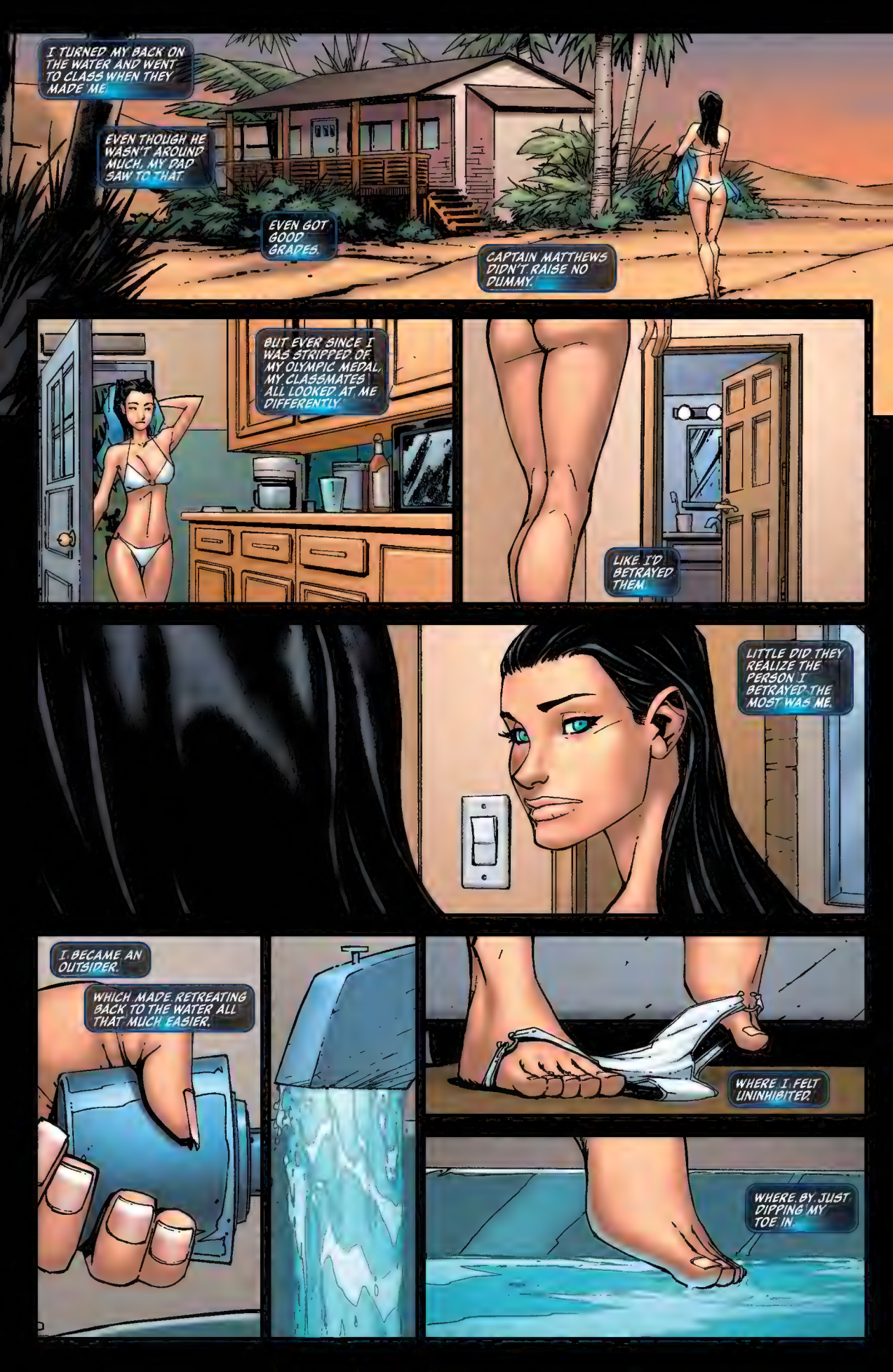
ASPEN SHOWCASE ASPEN Vol. 1 Issue # APRIL 2017 DIGITAL COPY Published by Aspen MLT Inc. Office of Publication: 5701 W Slauson Ave Suite 120 Culver City CA 90230

The Aspen MLT Inc. logo® is a registered trademark of Aspen MLT Inc. Aspen Showcase™ and the Aspen Showcase logo are the trademarks of Aspen MLT Inc. The entire contents of this book, all artwork, characters and their likenesses are © 2017 Aspen MLT Inc. All Rights Reserved. Any similarities between names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with persons living or dead or institutions is unintended and is purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted, reproduced or transmitted by any means or in any form without the express written consent of Aspen MLT Inc.

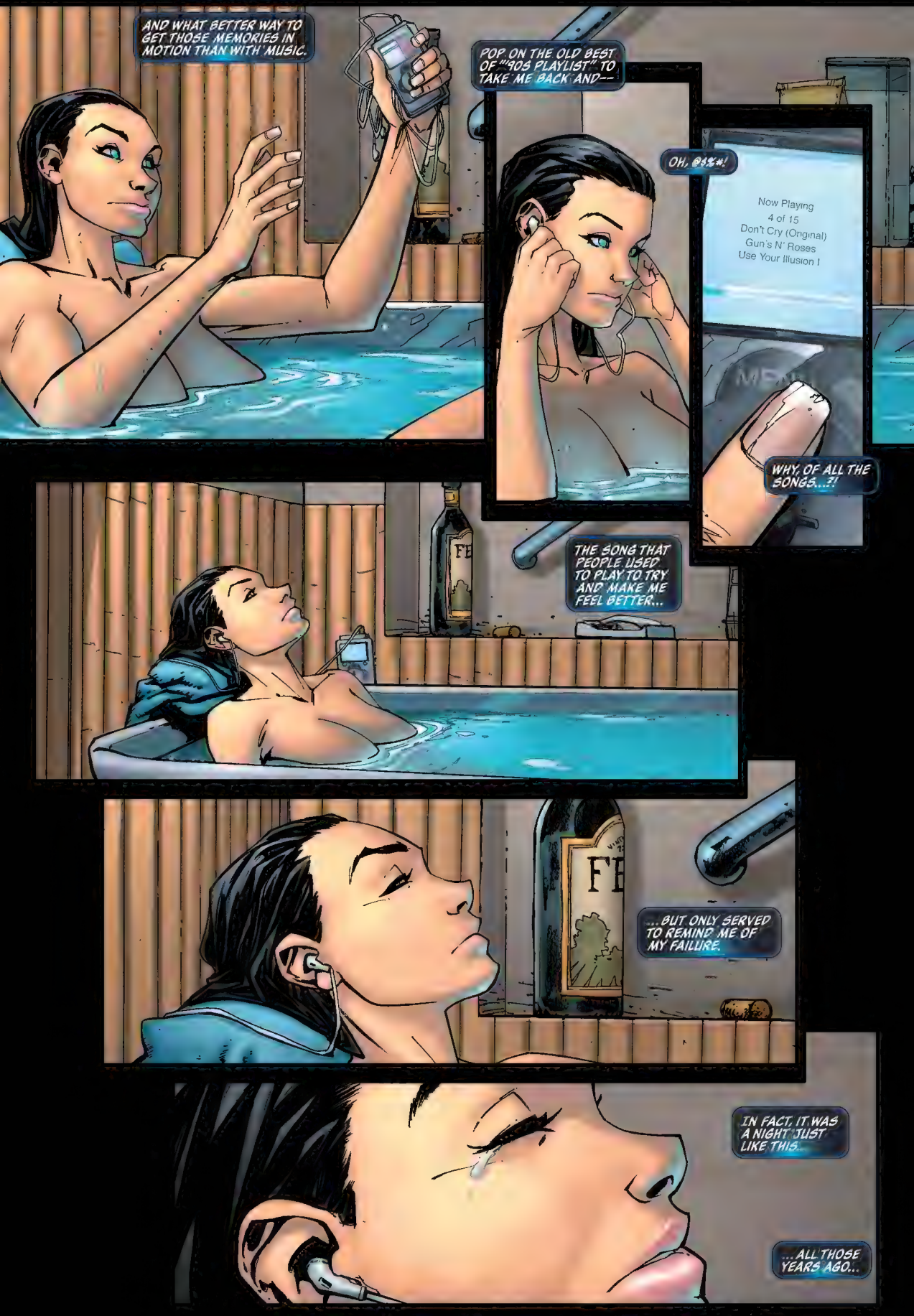
Visit us on the web at WWW.ASPENCOMICS.COM

THEY SAY HIGH SCHOOL SUCKS.
I WOULDN'T REALLY KNOW.
I WENT AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE.
I GOT MY EDUCATION OUT HERE ON THE WATER...


AND IN THE WATER...
IT BECAME MY CLASSROOM.
I LEARNED MORE WITH THE SAND IN MY TOES...
...THE WIND IN MY HAIR...
...AND THE SUN ON MY FACE, THAN I EVER COULD'VE HOPED TO IN SCHOOL.
BUT, EVEN SO, AT TIMES I WONDER IF I WASN'T MISSING OUT ON BEING A TEENAGER?


I TURNED MY BACK ON THE WATER AND WENT TO CLASS WHEN THEY MADE ME.
EVEN THOUGH HE WASN'T AROUND MUCH, MY DAD SAW TO THAT.
EVEN GOT GOOD GRADES.
CAPTAIN MATTHEWS DIDN'T RAISE NO DUMMY.
BUT EVER SINCE I WAS STRIPPED OF MY OLYMPIC MEDAL, MY CLASSMATES ALL LOOKED AT ME DIFFERENTLY.
LIKE I'D BETRAYED THEM.
LITTLE DID THEY REALIZE THE PERSON I BETRAYED THE MOST WAS ME.
I BECAME AN OUTSIDER.
WHICH MADE RETREATING BACK TO THE WATER ALL THAT MUCH EASIER.
WHERE I FELT UNINHIBITED.
WHERE, BY JUST DIPPING MY TOE IN.

Memories of Me...?


AND WHAT BETTER WAY TO GET THOSE MEMORIES IN MOTION THAN WITH MUSIC.
POP ON THE OLD BEST OF "90S PLAYLIST" TO TAKE ME BACK AND--
OH, @#$%*!
Now Playing
4 of 15
Don't Cry (Original)
Gun's N' Roses
Use Your Illusion I
WHY, OF ALL THE SONGS...?!
THE SONG THAT PEOPLE USED TO PLAY TO TRY AND MAKE ME FEEL BETTER...
...BUT ONLY SERVED TO REMIND ME OF MY FAILURE.
IN FACT, IT WAS A NIGHT JUST LIKE THIS.
...ALL THOSE YEARS AGO...

...WHEN I FOUND MYSELF ALL ALONE ON ANOTHER BIG NIGHT.
PROM NIGHT.
DATELESS.
WHEN NO ONE WANTED TO BE SEEN WITH ME.
NOT THAT I REALLY WANTED TO GO TO BEGIN WITH.
BUT IT HURT NONETHELESS.
THE TEARS POURED OUT.
...ALL THOSE MIXED EMOTIONS WELLING UP INSIDE ME...

...IMAGINING WHAT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN LIKE TO BE THERE.
TO BE ACCEPTED.
TO BE LOVED.

I TOLD MYSELF I HAD IMAGINED IT.
BUT IF I ONLY KNEW THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW.
THAT EVEN THEN THE WATER WAS CALLING ME.

AND EVEN THOUGH I'LL BE OUT OF MY ELEMENT TONIGHT...
...THAT DOESN'T MEAN I CAN'T LET MY HAIR DOWN A LITTLE.
MY EYES ARE OPEN TO THE WAYS OF THE WORLD NOW.
I KNOW WHAT MAKES PEOPLE TICK.
I JUST HAVE TO BE MYSELF.
EVEN IF THAT MEANS TRADING IN THE BATHING SUIT...
...FOR SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE CONSTRICTING.
I CAN'T ALWAYS HAVE THE SAND BETWEEN MY TOES.
IT'S TIME TO PUT ON A PRETTY FACE AND SHOW THEM HOW FAR I'VE COME.

I JUST HOPE I DON'T LOOK TOO MUCH LIKE A FISH OUT OF WATER!

WELCOME BACK

SO MUCH FOR WISHFUL THINKING.

I GUESS YOU CAN PUT YOUR PAST BEHIND YOU...

...BUT YOU CAN NEVER TRULY ESCAPE IT.

WHY DID I EVEN BOTHER TO COME?

ASPEN MATTHEWS?

IS THAT YOU, PENGUIN?

CLASS OF 19

JESSE MERLINO?!
MY GOD, YOU LOOK GREAT, JESSE! LIKE NOT A DAY'S PASSED SINCE GRADUATION!
AND I'M SO HAPPY THE SAME CAN'T BE SAID OF YOU!
THIS IS QUITE THE STEP UP FROM THE T-SHIRT-N-JEANS TOMBOY I USED TO KNOW!
IT'S SO GOOD TO SEE YOU AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, PENGUIN.
YOU TOO, JESS.
BUT I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S BEEN OVER A DECADE AND I STILL HAVE TO TELL YOU...
DON'T CALL ME "PENGUIN"!
YOU KNOW HOW I HATE THAT NICKNAME!
I KNOW, I KNOW. SORRY, OLD HABITS AND ALL THAT...
LET ME BUY YOU A DRINK TO MAKE IT UP TO YOU.
DRINKS ARE FREE TONIGHT.
ALL THE BETTER!
CHAMPAGNE? YOU?! THEY OUT OF BUDWEISER?
WHAT CAN I SAY? I'M A CHANGED MAN.
OH, I'LL BE THE JUDGE OF THAT!

1973
1989
HOW ABOUT A TOAST TO THE OLD DAYS, PENGUIN!
STILL NOT COMFORTABLE BEING THE CENTER OF ATTENTION, I SEE.
IT'S LIKE EVERYONE CAME OUT TO SEE WHAT THE SCHOOL'S BIGGEST DISGRACE LOOKS LIKE THESE DAYS.
OH, WILL YOU STOP?! THEY'RE ALL STANDING THERE KICKING THEMSELVES FOR NOT TRYING TO GET IN YOUR PANTS ALL THOSE YEARS AGO.
JESSE!
I'M SERIOUS. I BET EVEN THE WOMEN HERE ARE THINKING ABOUT SWITCHING TEAMS AFTER GETTING A LOOK AT YOU TONIGHT!
BUT ALLOW ME TO SAVE THIS LONG-LOST SURFER GIRL FROM THE CIRCLING SHARKS.

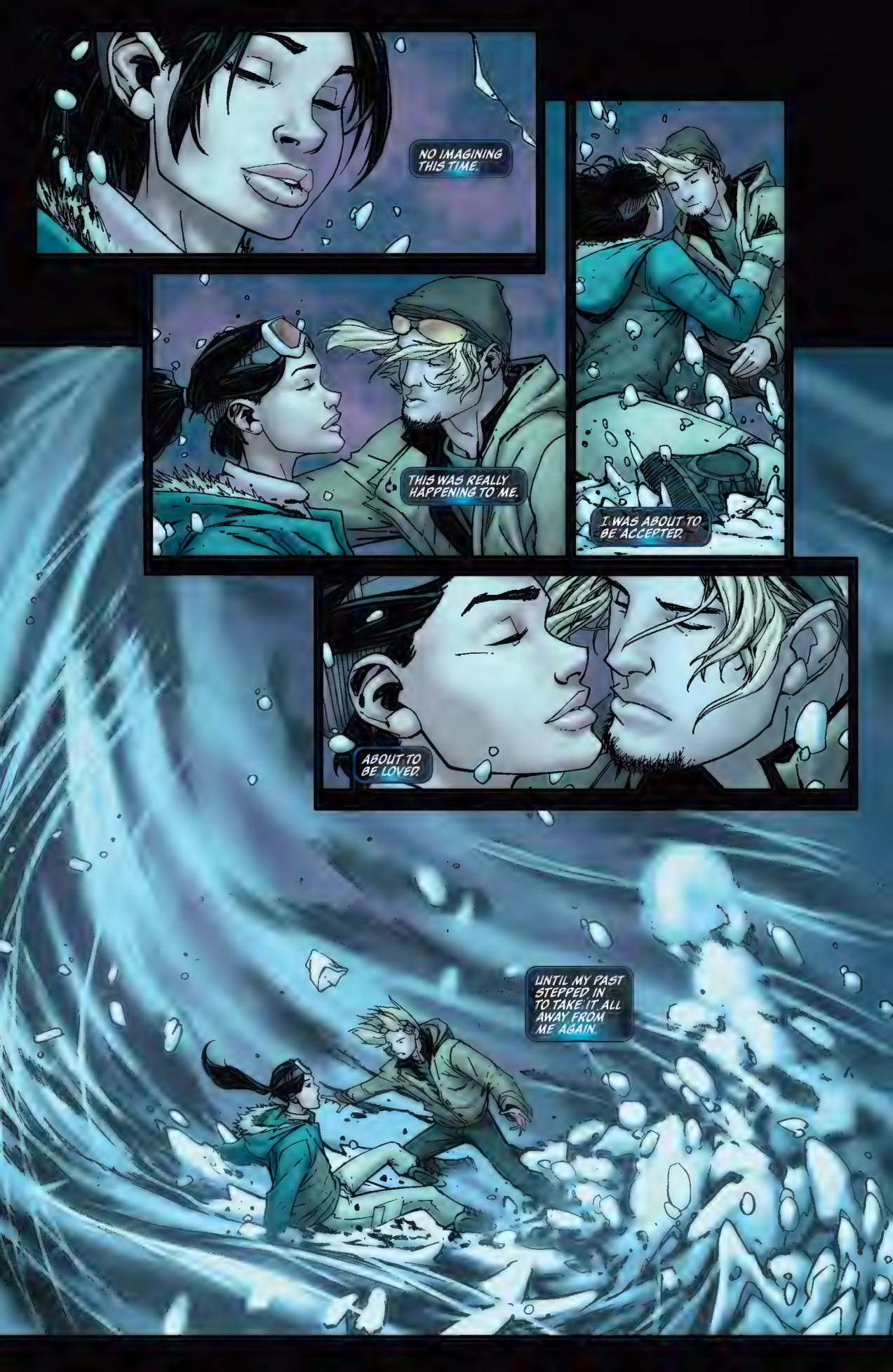
HERE, YOU LOOK LIKE YOU COULD USE ANOTHER...
CHANGED MAN, YOU SAY? YOU GONNA TRY TO GET ME DRUNK AND, HOW DID YOU SO ELOQUENTLY JUST PUT IT... GET IN MY PANTS?
YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED AT ALL SINCE HIGH SCHOOL, JESS!
AND YOU STILL HAVEN'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, HAVE YOU, PENGUIN?
AT LEAST GIVE ME A LITTLE CREDIT. WHY WOULD I TRY TO GET IN YOUR PANTS...
BACK
... WHEN YOU'RE WEARING A DRESS?
HAHAHAHA
SO LET'S START OVER...
A TOAST TO THE OLD DAYS!
CHING

SORRY IF I WAS KINDA BITCHY BACK THERE, JESS. YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW HARD IT WAS FOR ME TO WALK INTO THIS PLACE TONIGHT.
AFTER EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED, I HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO EXPECT.
BUT YOU STILL CAME. AND THAT TAKES GUTS, PEN-- I MEAN... ASPEN.
YOU NEVER TOOK CRAP FROM ANYONE. I ALWAYS ADMIRED YOU FOR THAT.
YOU KNOW, IF YOU SAID SWEET THINGS LIKE THAT YEARS AGO, YOU MIGHT HAVE ACTUALLY GOTTEN LUCKY.
THAT'S ALL IT WOULD HAVE TAKEN?! NOW YOU TELL ME!
YOU KNOW HOW MUCH MONEY YOU COULD HAVE SAVED ME ON BEER?!
OH YEAH, SURE... LIKE IT EVER WENT TO WASTE! EVERY TIME I TURNED YOU DOWN, YOU JUST WENT AND FOUND SOME SLUT TO HOOK UP WITH!
FWAP
TURNED ME DOWN?! YOU WISH! IF MEMORY SERVES, THERE WERE A FEW TIMES YOU WANTED IT JUST AS BAD AS I DID.
BUT WHENEVER WE TRIED TO HOOK UP, THINGS ALWAYS GOT SCREWY!
"THINGS GOT SCREWY?" WHAT THE HELL'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?
DON'T TELL ME YOU FORGOT ABOUT OUR SENIOR SKI TRIP?
TO BEAR MOUNTAIN?
OH MY GOD!

WITH JESSE'S WORDS, THE MEMORIES ALL CAME RUSHING BACK.
WILL YOU SLOW DOWN, PENGUIN?! I NEED TO TELL YOU SOMETHING!
AND HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU...
I HATE THAT NICKNAME!
OH, IT SUITS YOU AND YOU KNOW IT!
I MEAN, LOOK AT YOU, AS COMFORTABLE ON THE SNOW AS YOU ARE IN THE WATER!
WHATEVER. JUST PLEASE DON'T CALL ME THAT!
NOW WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT YOU HAD TO INTERRUPT OUR RUN?
LOOK, WE'VE GOTTEN PRETTY CLOSE OVER THIS PAST YEAR AND ALL, BUT WE NEVER SPEND MUCH TIME ALONE SO I WAS WONDERING...
OH, THIS SHOULD BE GOOD!
"PRIVATE TIME," HUH? YOU COULDN'T HAVE COME UP WITH A BETTER EUPHEMISM?
... ONCE WE GET BACK TO THE CABIN, MAYBE WE COULD GET SOME... WELL... "PRIVATE TIME" IN? YOU KNOW, JUST THE TWO OF US?
HUH? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
THERE ARE SO MANY MORE CREATIVE WAYS TO ASK ME IF I WANNA FOOL AROUND WITH YOU, JESS. LIKE THIS...
CAN YOU SKI MOGULS?
MOGULS? SURE, WHY?
FIRST YOU SHOW ME YOU'RE MAN ENOUGH TO HANDLE THOSE BUMPS...
... THEN MAYBE I'LL CONSIDER LETTING YOU HAVE A GO AT THESE!

AS MUCH AS I'D LIKE TO STAY AND ENJOY THE VIEW FROM BEHIND, PENGUIN...
... I HOPE TO HAVE MORE THAN MY EYES ON YOU LATER!
HEY!
WHOA... WHOA...

ASPEN!!
OH, GOD, I'M SO SORRY! I'M--
YOU'RE AN ASS IS WHAT YOU ARE!
THIS NEVER WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF YOURS WASN'T SO NICE, YOU KNOW...
WUMP
GOOD LUCK GETTING YOUR HANDS ON IT NOW, PAL!
LOOK, I REALLY AM SORRY, ASPEN! I DIDN'T MEAN FOR THAT TO HAPPEN. I JUST--
DON'T WORRY, JESS. I KNOW YOU DIDN'T MEAN IT.
I BELIEVE YOU.
YOU DO?
YEAH.
BUT YOU NEVER BELIEVE ME.
AND YOU NEVER CALL ME ASPEN.


NO IMAGINING THIS TIME.
THIS WAS REALLY HAPPENING TO ME.
I WAS ABOUT TO BE ACCEPTED.
ABOUT TO BE LOVED.
UNTIL MY PAST STEPPED IN TO TAKE IT ALL AWAY FROM ME AGAIN.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?!
ASPEN!
I'M NOT-- ?!
UNNNNFFF!
JESSE! NO!
OH MY GOD! JESSE!
SOMEONE PLEASE HELP!
MY SECRET PAST... ONE THAT I SEE NOW DEFINED ME MORE SO THAN I EVER REALIZED
LIKE SOME SUB-CONSCIOUS GHOST THAT HAUNTED ME...
...OR WATCHED OVER ME, DEPENDING ON HOW YOU LOOK AT IT.

I'M SO SORRY THAT HAPPENED TO YOU, JESS!
TO USE YOUR EUPHEMISM, NOT EXACTLY THE KIND OF BUMP I WAS HOPING FOR THAT DAY.
SORRY FOR WHAT, ASPEN? YOU CAN'T BLAME YOURSELF FOR FREAK WEATHER CONDITIONS ALL THOSE YEARS AGO!
LIKE I SAID, THINGS JUST GOT SCREWY.
SCREWY? YEAH, RIGHT...
WHAT WAS IT I SAID EARLIER?
"IF I ONLY KNEW THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW."
WHAT WAS THAT FOR?
FOR THE MEMORY.
MAYBE I COULD HAVE HAD MORE CONTROL OVER MY LIFE.
OF MY DESTINY.
WHAT? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
I'M SO GLAD I CAME HERE TONIGHT. JUST SEEING YOU...
YOU REMINDED ME OF WHO I AM.
OF WHO I'VE ALWAYS BEEN.
WELL, NOW I KNOW.
THANK YOU.
ASPEN, WAIT!
BUT... SHE WASN'T CRYING?
AND IT'S WHAT I CHOOSE TO DO GOING FORWARD THAT'S GOING TO MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN MY LIFE FROM NOW ON.

THE TRIPS DOWN MEMORY LANE TONIGHT MADE ME REALIZE THAT MY PAST IS NO LONGER SOMETHING I WANT TO PUT BEHIND ME.
IT'S A PART OF MY LIFE I NEED TO ACCEPT.
AND WHILE THERE ARE PIECES OF IT I MAY NOT LIKE...
...IT'S THE WHOLE OF MY PAST THAT MAKES ME WHO I AM.
THAT MAKES ME ASPEN MATTHEWS.
AND I LIKE WHO I AM.

LIFE ON LAND IS WHAT DEFINED MY PAST...
...AND LIFE IN THE WATER IS WHERE MY FUTURE MAY LIE.
BUT FOR NOW, I'M JUST GONNA LIE BACK AND ENJOY THE PRESENT FOR WHAT IT IS.
BECAUSE IF NOTHING ELSE, LIFE IS ALL ABOUT BALANCE.
AND I THINK I'VE FINALLY FOUND MINE.
The End...

ASPEN SHOWCASE

J.T. KRUL Micah GUNNELL

ASPEN SHOWCASE

J.T. KRUL Micah GUNNELL

Benoist

Writer:
J.T. Krul

Pencils:
Micah Gunnell

Inks:
Rob Stull

Colors:
John Starr
Beth Sotelo

Letters:
Josh Reed

Special Thanks:
Lori Hanson

Aspen Showcase

Cover A:
Micah Gunnell
John Starr

Cover B:
Francis Manapul
Peter Steigerwald

For Aspen: Founder: Michael Turner Co-Owner: Peter Steigerwald Co-Owner/President: Frank Mastromauro
Vice President/Editor-in-Chief: Vince Hernandez Vice President/Design and Production: Mark Roslan
Editor: Gabe Carrasco Office Manager: Megan Madrigal Editorial Intern: Mexi Granillion Production: Justice AspenStore.com: Chris Rupp

Editor: Vince Hernandez, Design and Production: Mark Roslan with Peter Steigerwald

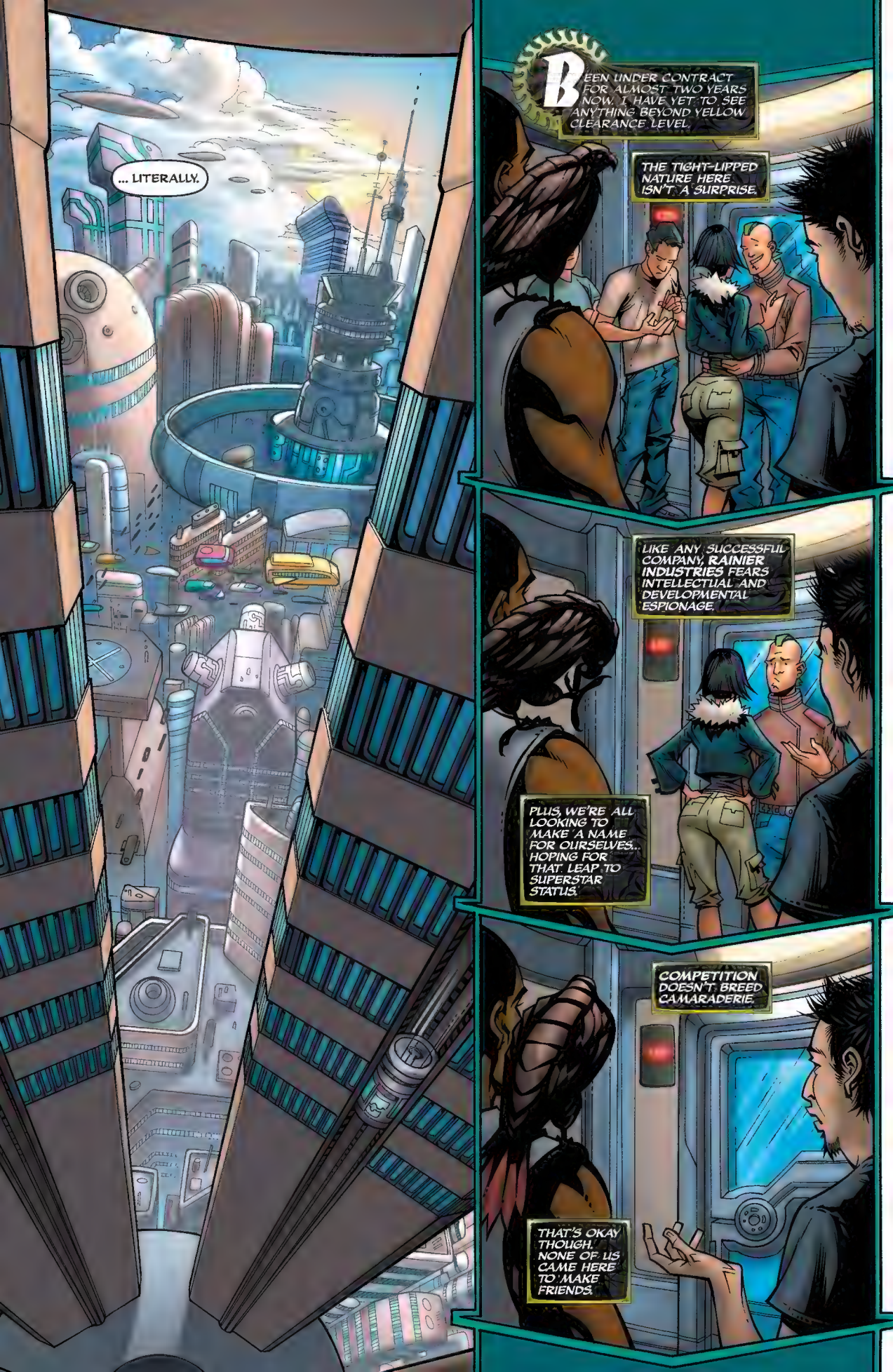
Solitude and Benoist Created By: Michael Turner, Original Lettering Font By: Dreamer Design

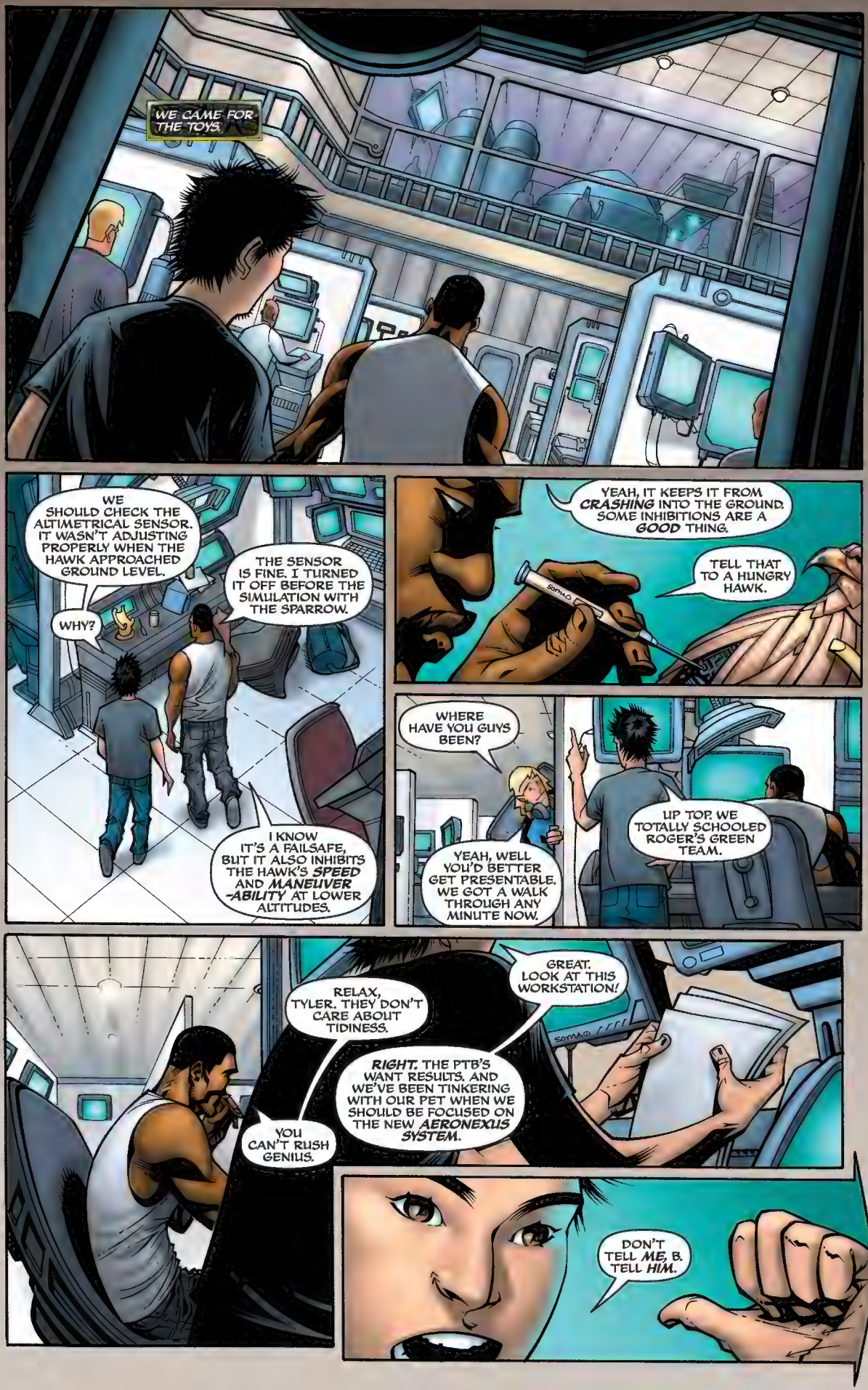
ASPEN SHOWCASE BENOIST Vol. 1 Issue 1 APRIL 2017 DIGITAL COPY Published by Aspen MLT Inc. Office of Publication: 5701 W. Slauson Ave. Suite 120 Culver City, CA 90230
The Aspen MLT, Inc. logo® is a registered trademark of Aspen MLT, Inc. Aspen Showcase™ and the Aspen Showcase logo are the trademarks of Aspen MLT, Inc. The entire contents of this book, all artwork, characters and their likenesses are © 2017 Aspen MLT, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Any similarities between names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with persons living or dead or institutions is unintended and is purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted, reproduced or transmitted by any means or in any form without the express written consent of Aspen MLT, Inc.

Visit us on the web at WWW.ASPENCOMICS.COM

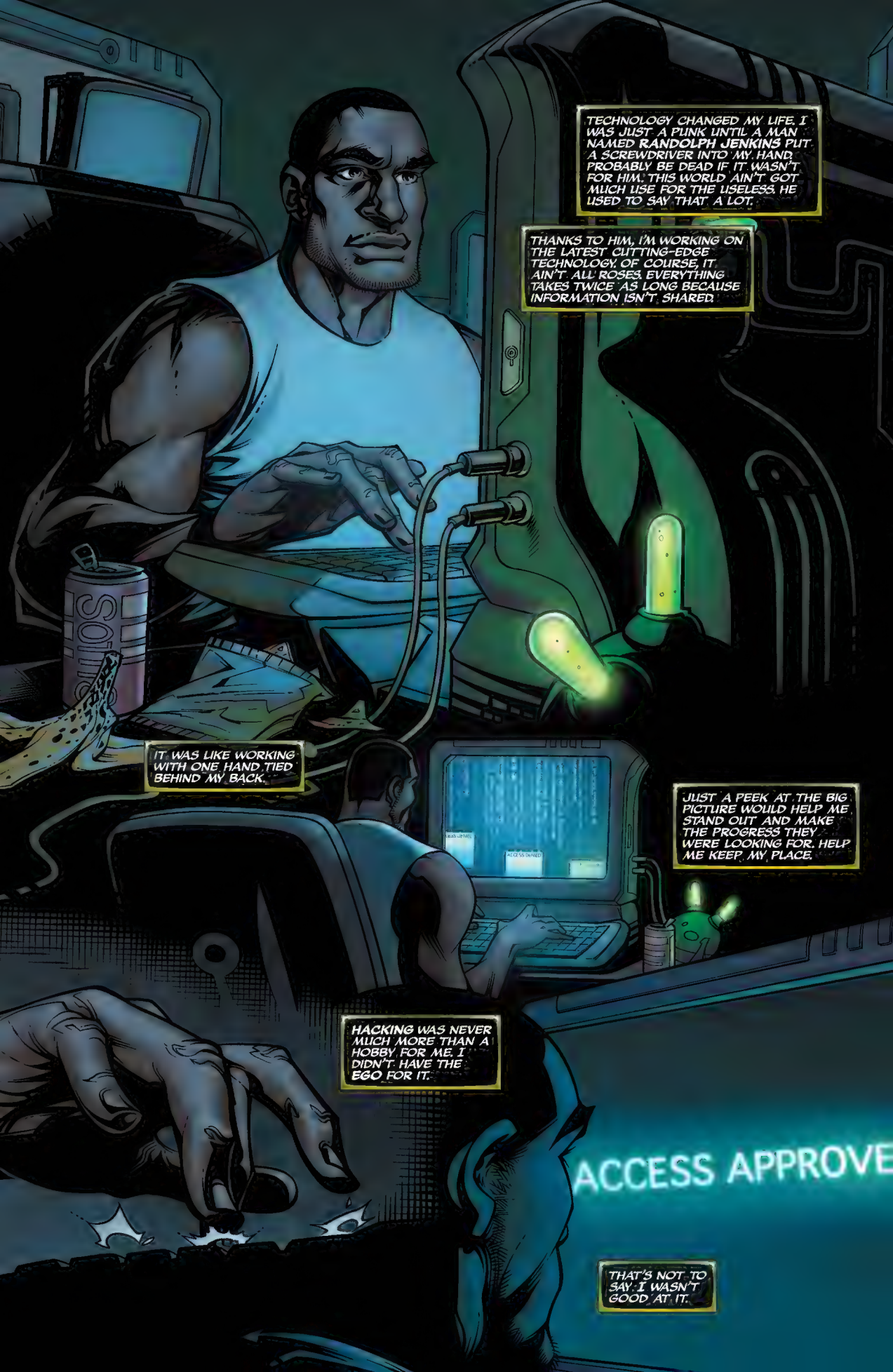
SKKRREEE!!!

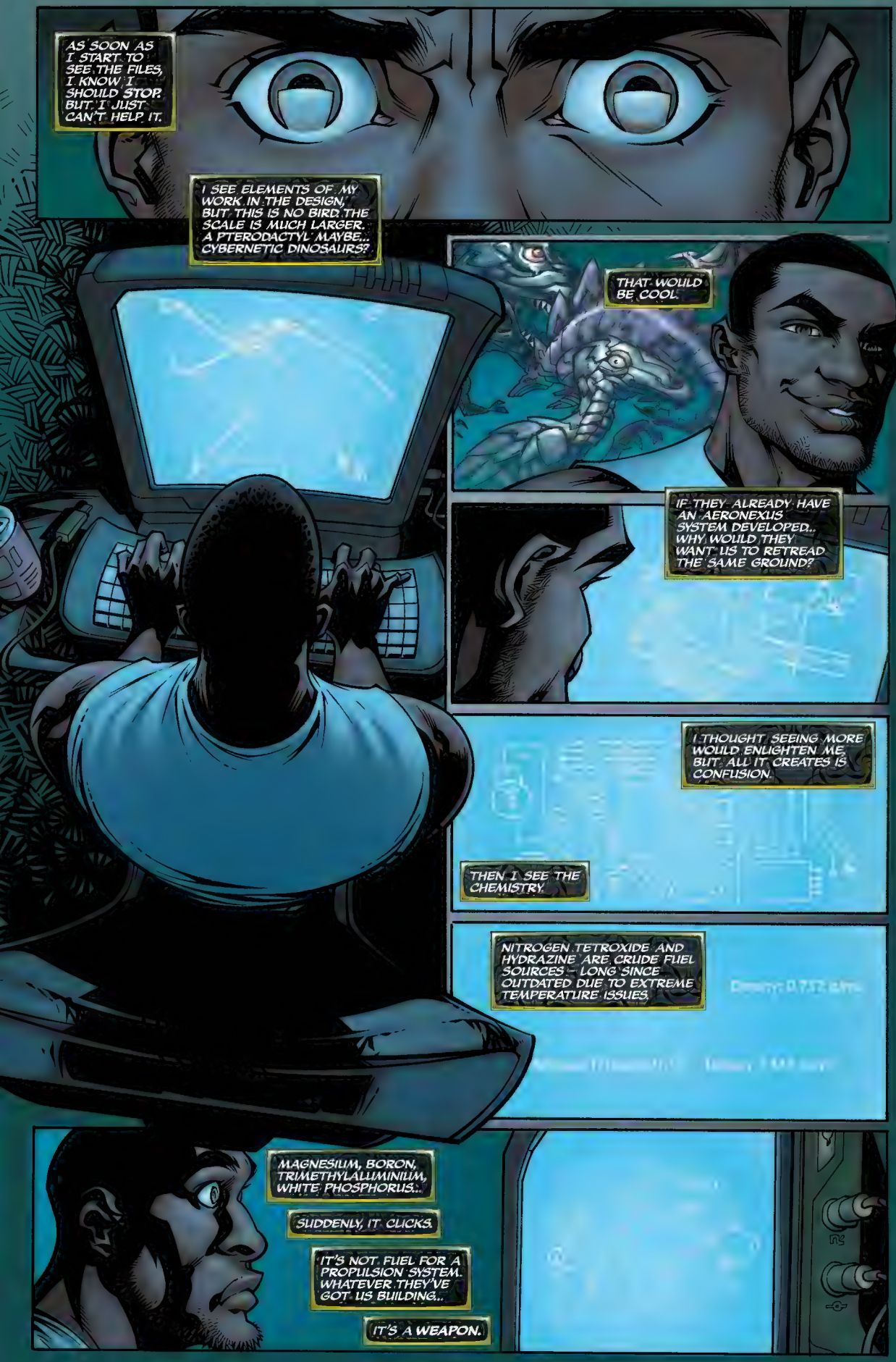
YEAH!
SNATCHED.
GAME OVER.
GOTCHA!
DAMMIT.
I TOTALLY HAD HIM ANGLING RIGHT, BUT HE DIDN'T GO THAT WAY. MUST BE A TRANSMISSION ERROR.
YOU SERIOUS? IT WAS YOUR CONTROLLER!
SHUT UP, BENOIST.
LOOK, IF YOU WANT, I CAN COME BY AND CHECK OUT YOUR SCHEMATICS. IT'S THE LEAST I COULD DO.
NO THANKS. MAYBE YOU DIDN'T READ THE THREE HUNDRED PAGE CONTRACT WE ALL SIGNED ON DAY ONE, BUT I DID. THERE ARE STRICT POLICIES REGARDING INTRA-DEPARTMENTAL BREACHES. WE'RE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR OWN CORNER OF THE PROJECT. THE REST IS OFF LIMITS.
YEAH, YEAH. I KNOW THE PROTOCOLS, BUT IT'S COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE TO HAVE US ALL WORKING IN THE DARK.
SMALL PRICE TO PAY FOR WORKING ON CLOUD NINE...


... LITERALLY.
BEEN UNDER CONTRACT FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS NOW, I HAVE YET TO SEE ANYTHING BEYOND YELLOW CLEARANCE LEVEL.
THE TIGHT-LIPPED NATURE HERE ISN'T A SURPRISE.
LIKE ANY SUCCESSFUL COMPANY, RAINIER INDUSTRIES FEARS INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL ESPIONAGE.
PLUS, WE'RE ALL LOOKING TO MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES... HOPING FOR THAT LEAP TO SUPERSTAR STATUS.
COMPETITION DOESN'T BREED CAMARADERIE.
THAT'S OKAY THOUGH. NONE OF US CAME HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS.


WE CAME FOR THE TOYS.
WE SHOULD CHECK THE ALTIMETRICAL SENSOR. IT WASN'T ADJUSTING PROPERLY WHEN THE HAWK APPROACHED GROUND LEVEL.
WHY?
THE SENSOR IS FINE. I TURNED IT OFF BEFORE THE SIMULATION WITH THE SPARROW.
I KNOW IT'S A FAILSAFE, BUT IT ALSO INHIBITS THE HAWK'S SPEED AND MANEUVER -ABILITY AT LOWER ALTITUDES.
YEAH, IT KEEPS IT FROM CRASHING INTO THE GROUND. SOME INHIBITIONS ARE A GOOD THING.
TELL THAT TO A HUNGRY HAWK.
WHERE HAVE YOU GUYS BEEN?
YEAH, WELL YOU'D BETTER GET PRESENTABLE. WE GOT A WALK THROUGH ANY MINUTE NOW.
UP TOP. WE TOTALLY SCHOOLED ROGER'S GREEN TEAM.
RELAX, TYLER. THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT TIDINESS.
YOU CAN'T RUSH GENIUS.
RIGHT. THE PTB'S WANT RESULTS. AND WE'VE BEEN TINKERING WITH OUR PET WHEN WE SHOULD BE FOCUSED ON THE NEW AERONEXUS SYSTEM.
GREAT. LOOK AT THIS WORKSTATION!
DON'T TELL ME, B. TELL HIM.

HIS NAME IS THE SAME ONE ON THE BUILDING...
RAINIER.
HE'S BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF ROBOTICS, BIOENGINEERING, AND CYBERNETICS FOR THE LAST DECADE.
SOMETHING OF A RECLUSE. I DIDN'T EVEN SEE A PICTURE OF HIM UNTIL I STARTED WORKING HERE.
SOME PEOPLE ARE DEDICATED; OTHERS ARE DRIVEN...
... THIS GUY SEEMS ALMOST OBSESSED.
WE JUST DODGED A BULLET. THEY DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE US.
YOU THINK THAT'S A GOOD THING? TYLER, WE NEED TO GET NOTICED IF WE'RE EVER GONNA MOVE UP IN THIS PLACE.
TIME TO GET TO WORK.


TECHNOLOGY CHANGED MY LIFE. I WAS JUST A PUNK UNTIL A MAN NAMED RANDOLPH JENKINS PUT A SCREWDRIVER INTO MY HAND. PROBABLY BE DEAD IF IT WASN'T FOR HIM. THIS WORLD AIN'T GOT MUCH USE FOR THE USELESS. HE USED TO SAY THAT A LOT.
THANKS TO HIM, I'M WORKING ON THE LATEST CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY. OF COURSE, IT AIN'T ALL ROSES. EVERYTHING TAKES TWICE AS LONG BECAUSE INFORMATION ISN'T SHARED.
IT WAS LIKE WORKING WITH ONE HAND TIED BEHIND MY BACK.
JUST A PEEK AT THE BIG PICTURE WOULD HELP ME STAND OUT AND MAKE THE PROGRESS THEY WERE LOOKING FOR. HELP ME KEEP MY PLACE.
HACKING WAS NEVER MUCH MORE THAN A HOBBY FOR ME. I DIDN'T HAVE THE EGO FOR IT.
ACCESS APPROVE
THAT'S NOT TO SAY I WASN'T GOOD AT IT.


AS SOON AS I START TO SEE THE FILES, I KNOW I SHOULD STOP. BUT I JUST CAN'T HELP IT.
I SEE ELEMENTS OF MY WORK IN THE DESIGN, BUT THIS IS NO BIRD. THE SCALE IS MUCH LARGER. A PTERODACTYL MAYBE... CYBERNETIC DINOSAURS?
THAT WOULD BE COOL.
IF THEY ALREADY HAVE AN AERONEXUS SYSTEM DEVELOPED... WHY WOULD THEY WANT US TO RETREAD THE SAME GROUND?
I THOUGHT SEEING MORE WOULD ENLIGHTEN ME, BUT ALL IT CREATES IS CONFUSION.
THEN I SEE THE CHEMISTRY.
NITROGEN TETROXIDE AND HYDRAZINE ARE CRUDE FUEL SOURCES - LONG SINCE OUTDATED DUE TO EXTREME TEMPERATURE ISSUES.
MAGNESIUM, BORON, TRIMETHYLALUMINIUM, WHITE PHOSPHORUS...
SUDDENLY, IT CLICKS.
IT'S NOT FUEL FOR A PROPULSION SYSTEM. WHATEVER THEY'VE GOT US BUILDING...
IT'S A WEAPON.

I'M SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT FLASHING LIGHTS ARE NEVER A GOOD SIGN.
STUPID, STUPID, STUPID. WELL, B, YOU WANTED TO STAND OUT. NOW YOU WILL... IN PRISON.
GOTTA GET OUTTA HERE BEFORE THEY FIND ME.
DAMN...
...TOO LATE.
REX64
DROP IT.
THIS IS UNIT SEVEN. SECURITY BREACH HAS BEEN NEUTRALIZED.

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT I TAKE SUCH BETRAYALS VERY SERIOUSLY.
AND, NOW THAT YOU HAVE?
LOOK, I'M SORRY, BUT I WASN'T STEALING ANYTHING. I JUST WANTED TO GET A LOOK AT THE BIGGER PICTURE SO I COULD DO THE JOB YOU HIRED ME FOR.
WHAT CAN I SAY? MOST OF THE PEOPLE YOU HAVE WORKING HERE BELIEVE YOU WANT TO BUILD THE WORLD UP.. NOT TEAR IT DOWN.
ABEL, WHAT IS THE VERDICT?
ANALYSIS CONFIRMS NO TRANSMISSIONS. THE BREACH ENDS WITH HIM.
GOOD.
SAVE YOUR SPEECH. I DIDN'T SIGN UP TO MAKE WEAPONS FOR YOU TO SELL TO WARMONGERS ACROSS THE GLOBE.
AND I DIDN'T BRING YOU HERE TO DEBATE MY AGENDA. I'M ONLY INTERESTED IN CLOSING UP THE LOOSE ENDS.
MAINLY... YOU.
HEY!
AAAHHH!!
THE PAIN IS UNBEARABLE. I THINK HE'S BROKEN BOTH MY ARMS..

... THE TRUTH IS FAR WORSE.

AMIGO...
CAN YOU HEAR ME? DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?
DON'T MOVE.
I NEED TO STOP THE BLEEDING.

NNNNN.
EASY.
WHAT HAPPENED?
YOU HAD A TERRIBLE ACCIDENT MY FRIEND, AND YOU ARE STILL RECOVERING.
I... PUSHED..
... RAINIER.
I KNOW. I GOT YOU AWAY BEFORE HIS MEN CAME TO MAKE SURE YOU DIED IN THE FALL. THE DRUGS HAVE KEPT THE PAIN AWAY, BUT NOT THE NIGHTMARES FOR YOU I AM AFRAID.
MY HAND.. SO MUCH BLOOD..
WHAT IS YOUR NAME?
B... BENOIST.
HELLO, BENOIST. MY NAME IS GABRIEL...
... WE NEED TO TALK.

I THOUGHT YOU WERE *DEAD* FOR SURE WHEN I FOUND YOU, BUT YOUR VITALS WERE *STRONG* AND YOU SEEMED FREE OF ANY HEAD TRAUMA.
I MANAGED TO GET YOU HERE, BUT THE DAMAGE TO YOUR LIMBS WAS BEYOND REPAIR. IT'S TERRIBLE, BUT ALSO MIRACULOUS.
YOU SHOULD BE THANKFUL THAT YOU ARE STILL ALIVE.
YEAH, I FEEL *REALLY* LUCKY RIGHT NOW.
YOU SURVIVED A FALL FROM WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN OVER A HUNDRED STORIES.
I KNOW IT MUST SEEM DIFFICULT TO SEE THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THIS TUNNEL. BUT, WHILE YOUR BODY HAS SUFFERED GREATLY, YOU MIND IS STILL INTACT.
OBVIOUSLY YOUR WILL WAS STRONG ENOUGH TO GET YOU THROUGH THAT ORDEAL. WITH A LITTLE *FAITH* YOU'LL OVERCOME THIS OBSTACLE IN THE SAME WAY.
THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE WRONG, GABRIEL.
I DIDN'T SURVIVE. I *DIED.*
WHAT YOU SEE HERE NOW.
THE PARTS THAT STILL SEEM TO BE... FUNCTIONAL?
THEY'RE *DEAD,* TOO.
THEY JUST HAVEN'T GOTTEN THE MESSAGE YET.

ALMOST GOT IT.
DAMMIT.
THIS IS RIDICULOUS, GABRIEL. I'M NO GARDENER.
BUT, IT'S NOT A HAND. I DON'T HAVE HANDS ANYMORE. I HAVE A CLAW. JUST LIKE I DON'T HAVE FEET ANYMORE. I HAVE WHEELS.
THIS ISN'T MEANT TO BE A HOBBY FOR YOU. IT'S REHABILITATION. YOU NEED TO RETRAIN YOUR NERVE SIGNALS IF YOU ARE GOING TO USE THAT HAND EFFECTIVELY.
I DO NOT UNDERSTAND YOU, BENOIST. YOU LOATHE THE VERY IDEA OF USING THAT HAND, YOU DEMEAN AND DEGRADE WHAT WE HAVE WORKED SO HARD TO CONSTRUCT FOR YOU, AND YET, YOU STILL TRY.
IT'S BEEN MORE THAN A YEAR SINCE YOUR FALL, AND EVERYDAY I STILL WONDER IF I SHOULD HAVE JUST LET YOU DIE. WOULD THAT HAVE BEEN BETTER?
YOU'VE DONE SO MUCH FOR ME. YOU KEPT ME FROM FALLING INTO THE ABYSS. BUT... THIS ISN'T LIVING.
IN OTHER WORDS... TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTION... YEAH, PROBABLY.

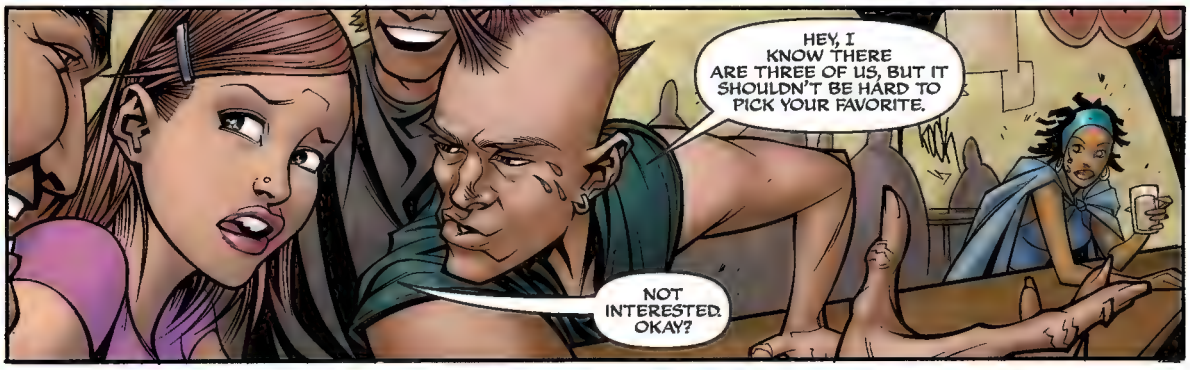
BAR
MOTEL
WHOA DUDE, NICE TRIP!
DOWN GOES FRAZIER.
NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL DRUNK DRIVING.
LIKE WATCHING A TURTLE ON HIS BACK.
HERE...

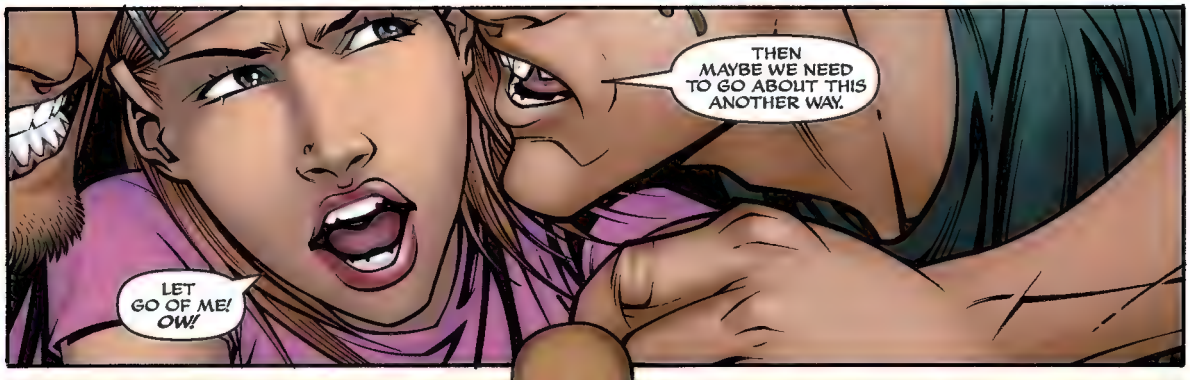
... LET ME HELP YOU.
DON'T TOUCH ME!
I... CAN... MANAGE.
SEE. I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP.
OR YOUR PITY.
IT'S CALLED COMPASSION...
... JACKASS.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT WAS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND MY MOTIVATION.
THE SMELL OF THE STALE BEER SOAKED INTO MY RIDE.
THE CRUEL LAUGHTER OF THOSE IDIOTS.
THE LOOK ON THAT WOMAN'S FACE.
OR MAYBE I JUST GOT TIRED OF EKING MY WAY ALONG TO THE GRAVE.
I KEPT TELLING MYSELF THAT I LOST EVERYTHING THAT NIGHT WHEN RAINIER THREW ME OUT THE WINDOW. AND I WAS RIGHT. I DID.
BUT THE MORE I WORKED, THE MORE I REALIZED THAT I COULD RECLAIM WHAT I HAD LOST. I COULD GET IT BACK.
ALL I NEEDED TO DO WAS PUT IN THE EFFORT... RELEARN WHAT WAS ONCE SECOND NATURE.
RETRAIN MY ENTIRE BODY...

... REMIND IT WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE ALIVE.

COME ON, BABY. LET'S GET OUT OF THIS PLACE.
WANNA DO SHOTS?
YOU'RE CUTE. A LITTLE OLD FOR ME... BUT CUTE.
NO... I'M GOOD.


HEY, I KNOW THERE ARE THREE OF US, BUT IT SHOULDN'T BE HARD TO PICK YOUR FAVORITE.
NOT INTERESTED. OKAY?


THEN MAYBE WE NEED TO GO ABOUT THIS ANOTHER WAY.
LET GO OF ME! OW!

THESE PINHEADS BOTHERING YOU?

HOW ABOUT YOU GIVE THE GIRL SOME SPACE?
I'LL GIVE YOU SOME SPACE...
... RIGHT BETWEEN YOUR FRIGGIN' EYES!
AHHHHH!
KRNCHH
MY HAND!!!
HANG TIGHT. YOU'RE FRIENDS WILL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU.

DON'T DRINK THE WATER
AT LEAST WHEN I WAS ON MY BACK, I COULD OPEN MY EYES.
NOW, I PITY YOU.

HEY! WAIT!
I JUST... THEY... I MEAN...
... I'M BENOIST.
I'M LYRA.
LOOK, BACK THERE. THAT WASN'T ME. I MEAN, IT WAS ME, BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT I... DO. YOU KNOW?
YOU'VE OBVIOUSLY SPENT A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AND ENERGY TO CONSTRUCT... THE NEW YOU. I'D HATE TO THINK IT WAS ALL SO THAT YOU COULD BEAT DOWN WEAKER MINDS.
IS THERE MORE TO YOU THAN THAT, BENOIST?
UM... YEAH... OF COURSE.
DO YOU WANNA SEE MY GARDEN?
MICAH
STILL
KELSEY

ASPEN SHOWCASE

David SCHWARTZ Randy GREEN Beth SOTELO

EMBER

#1

aspen comics

ASPEN SHOWCASE

David SCHWARTZ Randy GREEN Beth SOTELO

EMBER

#1

aspen comics

Ember

Writer:
David Schwartz

Pencils:
Randy Green

Colors:
Beth Sotelo

Letters:
Josh Reed

Aspen Showcase

Cover A:
Randy Green
Beth Sotelo

Cover B:
Micah Gunnell
Beth Sotelo

Cover C:
New York Comic-Con
Exclusive Limited
Edition of 750
Joe Benitez
Peter Steigerwald

For Aspen: Founder: Michael Turner Co-Owner: Peter Steigerwald Co-Owner/President: Frank Mastromauro
Vice President/Editor in Chief: Vince Hernandez Vice President/Design and Production: Mark Roslan
Editor: Gabe Carrasco Office Manager: Megan Madrigal Editorial Intern: Mexi Gramillion Production: Justice AspenStore.com: Chris Rupp

Editor: Vince Hernandez, Design and Production: Mark Roslan with Peter Steigerwald

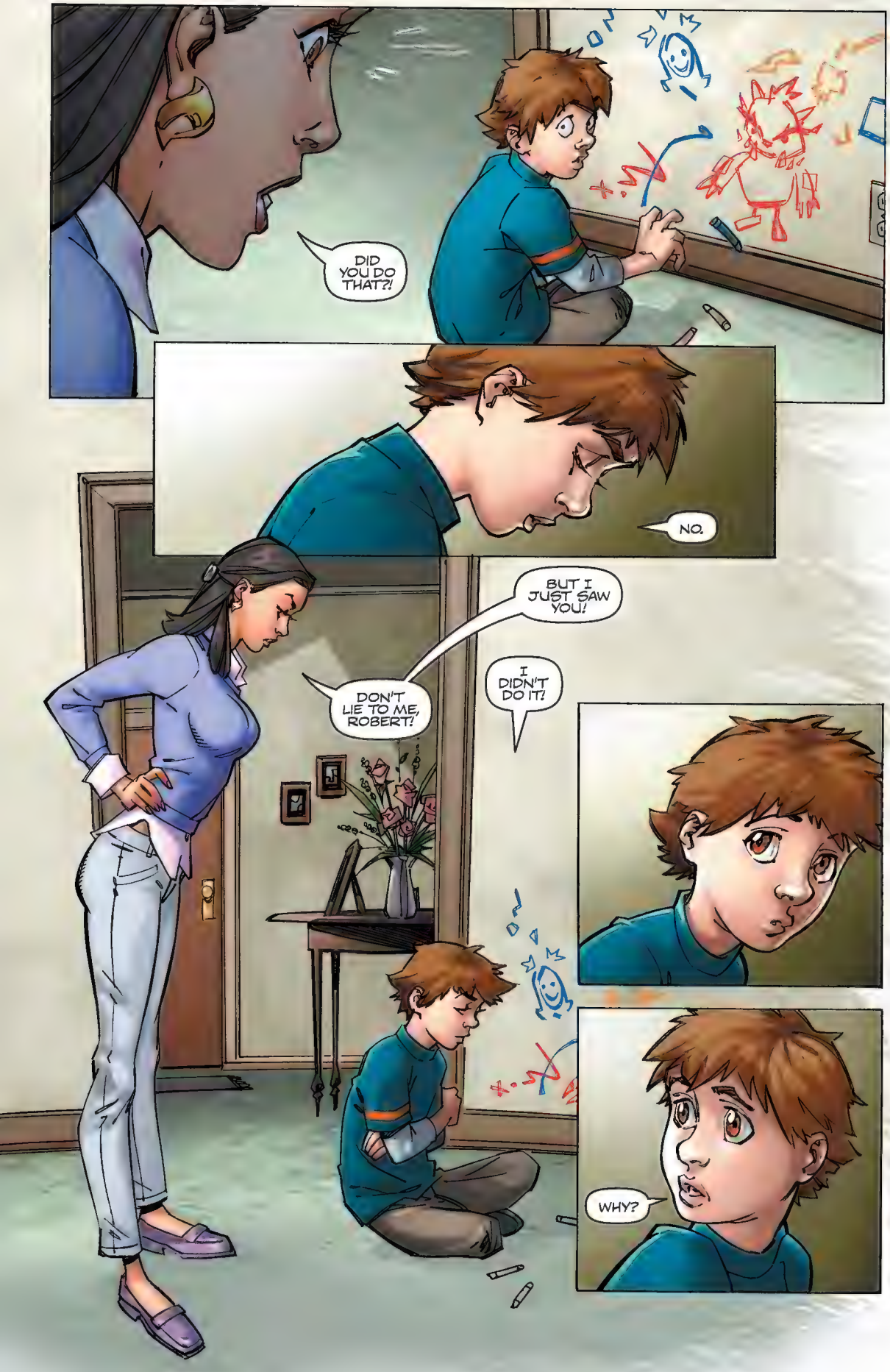
Suggested and Ember Created By: Michael Turner and Frank Mastromauro, Original Lettering Font By: Dreamuir Design

ASPEN SHOWCASE: EMBER Vol. 1 Issue 1 APRIL 2017. DIGITAL COPY. Published by Aspen MLT, Inc. Office of Publication: 5701 W. Slauson Ave. Suite 120, Culver City, CA 90230

The Aspen MLT, Inc. logo® is a registered trademark of Aspen MLT, Inc. Aspen Showcase™ and the Aspen Showcase logo are the trademarks of Aspen MLT, Inc. The entire contents of this book, all artwork, characters and their likenesses are © 2017 Aspen MLT, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Any similarities between names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with persons living or dead or institutions is unintended and is purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted, reproduced or transmitted by any means or in any form without the express written consent of Aspen MLT, Inc.

Visit us on the web at WWW.ASPENCOMICS.COM

ROBERT, STOP!
"WE TELL LIES WHEN WE ARE AFRAID... AFRAID OF WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, AFRAID OF WHAT OTHERS WILL THINK, AFRAID OF WHAT WILL BE FOUND OUT ABOUT US. BUT EVERY TIME WE TELL A LIE, THE THING THAT WE FEAR GROWS STRONGER."
- TAD WILLIAMS
"WHEN YOU STRETCH THE TRUTH, WATCH OUT FOR THE SNAPBACK."
- BILL COPELAND


DID YOU DO THAT?!
NO.
BUT I JUST SAW YOU!
I DIDN'T DO IT!
DON'T LIE TO ME, ROBERT!
WHY?

BECAUSE IT'S WRONG!
WHY?
BECAUSE I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO TRUST YOU AGAIN!
WHY?
BOBBY, LET ME TELL YOU A STORY.
IT'S ABOUT A WOMAN WHO LIED, AND ALL OF THE HORRIBLE THINGS THAT HAPPENED BECAUSE OF THAT ONE LIE.
IT ALL TAKES PLACE IN A VERY MAGICAL WORLD CALLED..

...PERSPECTA.
WE'VE RUN THE NUMBERS HUNDREDS OF TIMES, EMBER. THERE'S NO WAY THAT YOU CAN WIN THIS RACE.
BUT ALL THE GOOD I COULD DO?
ALL OF THE SOCIAL PROGRAMS I'VE CHAMPIONED? ALL OF THE EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES I WANT TO PUSH THROUGH?
DOES NONE OF THAT MATTER?
THIS IS POLITICS. THE TRUTH IS IRRELEVANT.
ALL THAT MATTERS IS HOW YOU MAKE PERSPECTANS FEEL.
AND YOUR OPPONENT HAS MADE PERSPECTANS FEEL LIKE THEY CAN'T TRUST YOU.
AFTER ALL, YOU'RE A HALF-BREED.

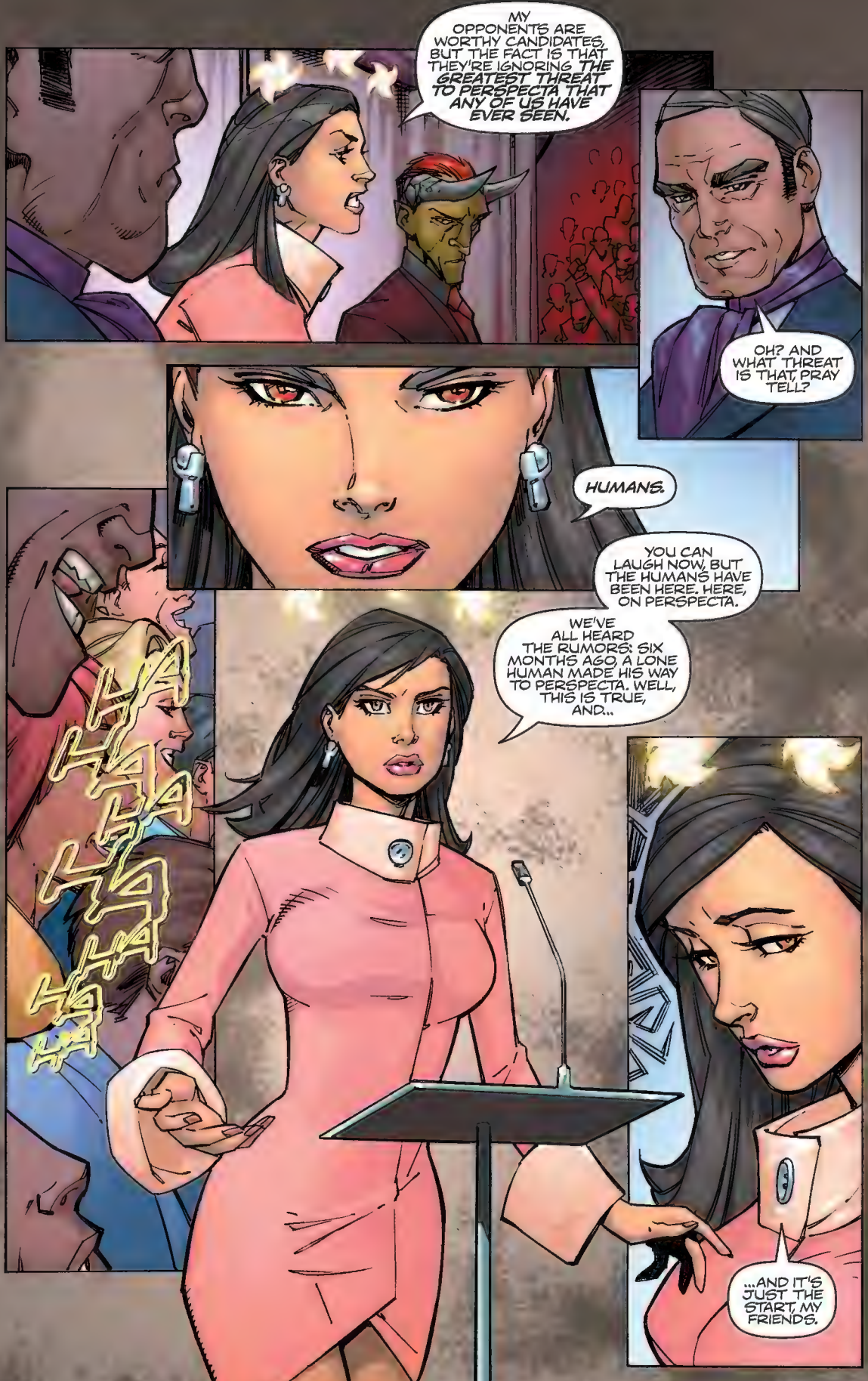
I'M THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS. I CAN BRING ELYSIANS AND NEFARIANS TOGETHER, STOP THE VIOLENCE, AND--
THE ELYSIANS FEAR THE NEFARIANS.
THE NEFARIANS HATE THE ELYSIANS.
AND YOUR OPPONENT HAS CONVINCED THE PEOPLE THAT IN *YOU*, IN A *HALF-BREED*, ALL THEY HAVE IS SOMETHING TO FEAR *AND* TO HATE.
YOU CAN'T WIN.
UNLESS...
I'M LISTENING.

UNLESS YOU GIVE THE VOTERS SOMETHING *ELSE* TO FEAR AND HATE EVEN MORE.
AN OUTSIDE FORCE THAT COULD CRUSH ALL OF PERSPECTA. AN OUTSIDE FORCE THAT BOTH ELYSIANS AND NEFARIANS ALIKE WOULD NEED TO UNITE AGAINST. AND YOU, YOU'D BE THE ONLY CANDIDATE TALKING ABOUT THIS THREAT. THE ONLY CANDIDATE TO MAKE HER ENTIRE CAMPAIGN BE ABOUT STRENGTH, ABOUT STOPPING THESE INVADING TERRORISTS, ABOUT NATIONAL DEFENSE...
WHAT THREAT ARE YOU--
BUT THE HUMANS CAN'T HURT US.
HUMANS.
A HUMAN CAME HERE ONCE, AND NOT TOO LONG AGO. THAT'S FRESH ON THE MINDS OF PERSPECTANS.
IF MORE HUMANS CAME HERE? WITH THEIR WICKED TEMPERS AND WILD WEAPONS? WITHOUT US ON THEIR SHOULDERS TO GUIDE THEM?
WELL, THEY COULD DESTROY US ALL.
IS THERE ANY THREAT OF THAT ACTUALLY HAPPENING?
ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE.
IS THERE ANY THREAT OF THAT ACTUALLY HAPPENING?
NONE WHATSOEVER. AT LEAST, NONE THAT I'M AWARE OF.
SO, IT'S A LIE. A LIE TO SCARE THE PERSPECTANS INTO VOTING FOR ME.

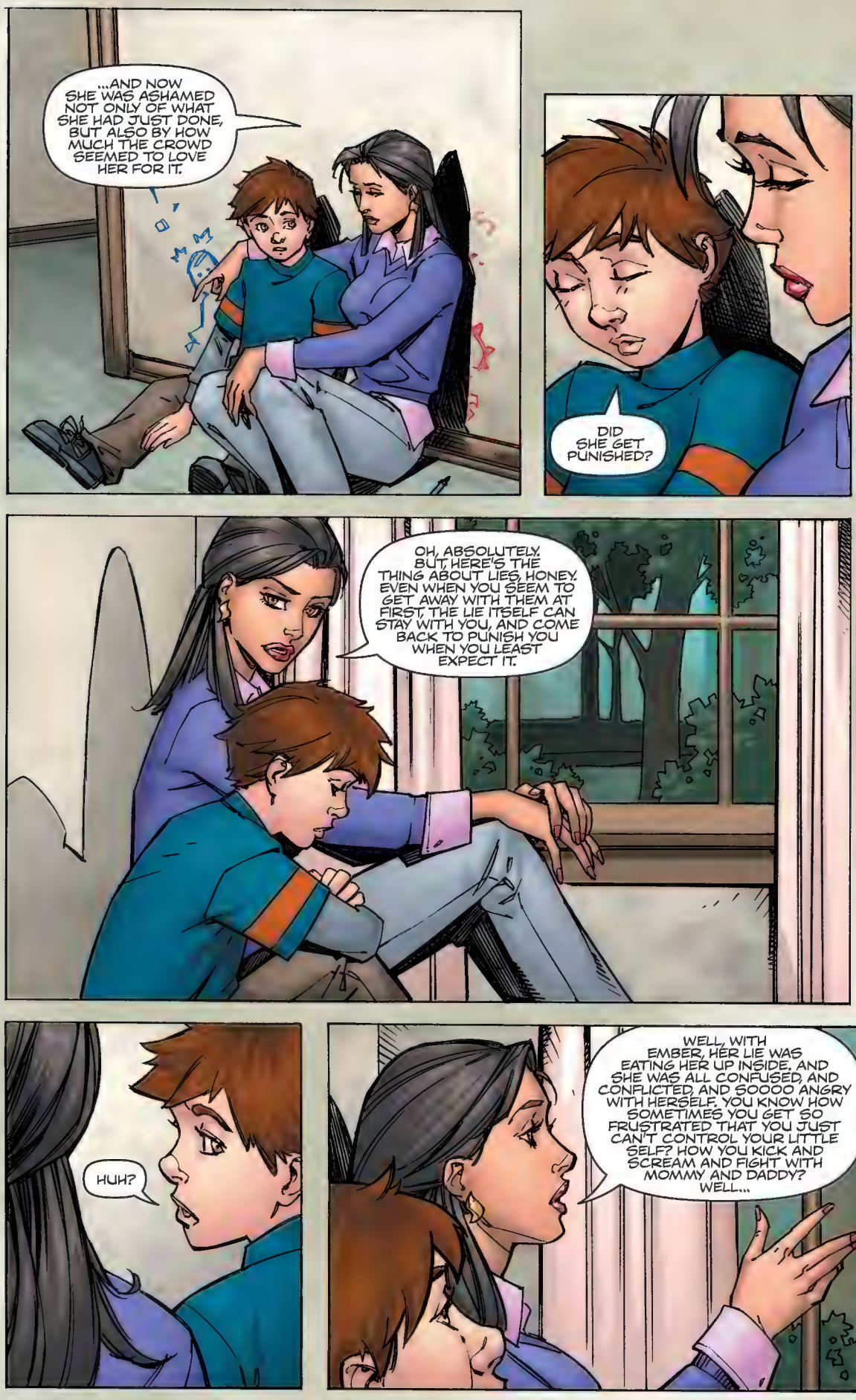
NO, IT'S A LIE TO GET YOU INTO OFFICE, SO THAT YOU CAN ACTUALLY DO SOME GOOD.
ONCE YOU WIN, WE ALL KNOW THAT YOU CAN DO INCREDIBLE THINGS. BRING OUR SPLINTERED WORLD TOGETHER. HEAL THE WOUNDS BETWEEN OUR PEOPLES. PUSH ALL YOUR... WONDERFUL... SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES.
BUT FIRST YOU'VE GOT TO WIN.
BUT NOT LIKE THIS.
EMBER, WHAT IF YOU WERE AT SEA, AND YOU SAW 500 PERSPECTANS IN A BOAT THAT WAS SINKING. YOU HAD THE POWER TO SAVE THEM. TO SAVE 500 LIVES. 500 INNOCENT LIVES. AND ALL YOU HAD TO DO, TO SAVE THESE PEOPLE, WAS TO TELL A LIE. WHICH MATTERS MORE? YOUR OWN PERSONAL MORAL CODE, OR SAVING THOSE LIVES?
WELL, OUR WORLD IS AT SEA RIGHT NOW, AND WE'RE ALL SINKING.
BLOODY CIVIL WARS, CRIPPLING STRIKES, INDUSTRY PLUMMETING. HOW CAN WE POSSIBLY KEEP HELPING THE HUMANS WHEN WE CAN'T EVEN HELP OURSELVES?
EMBER, IT'S ONE SMALL LIE, WEIGHED AGAINST ALL THE GOOD YOU CAN DO FOR MILLIONS.
ISN'T ONE SMALL STAIN ON YOUR CONSCIENCE WORTH TRADING FOR THE BETTERMENT OF ALL PERSPECTANS?

IF OUR UNION IS TO THRIVE, WE MUST END THIS FORCED SEGREGATION AND ALLOW ELYSIANS AND NEFARIANS TO CROSS OVER FREELY FROM ONE LAND TO THE OTHER.
NOT ONLY IS IT SIMPLY THE RIGHT AND MORALLY RESPONSIBLE THING TO DO, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY ESSENTIAL TO THE SURVIVAL OF OUR SOCIETY.
AFTER ALL, TO PARAPHRASE SOME WORDS I ONCE HELPED ONE OF MY HUMANS TO WRITE, "A PERSPECTA DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND."
THAT'S SIMPLY FEEL-GOOD FOOLISHNESS. IT'S STILL TOO SOON SINCE THE WORLDS MERGED.
OUR RESPECTIVE PEOPLES JUST AREN'T READY YET FOR THAT TYPE OF FULL INTEGRATION. THERE'LL BE ANARCHY, CHAOS.
WHEN I'M ELECTED WE'LL MOVE SLOWLY, METHODICALLY, AND NOT TAKE THE TYPE OF BRASH AND FOOLISH CHANCES THAT MY OPPONENT ESPOUSES IN THE NAME OF "MORALITY."
WHILE I DO RESPECT HIS IDEALISM, IT'S SIMPLY UNREALISTIC, AND HE'S SIMPLY NOT READY TO LEAD.
WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO MY--
OK, AND NOW, CLOSING STATEMENTS.
HEY! I--

SHE'S GETTING KILLED OUT THERE. THEY'RE COMPLETELY IGNORING HER.
IT'S PERFECT. IT'LL PUSH HER OVER THE EDGE.
HEY, WAIT A MINUTE! I'VE BARELY GOTTEN TO--
SHUT UP, HALF-BREED!
HA HA HA HA
YEAH, HALF-BREED!
LISTEN TO ME.
LISTEN TO ME!


MY OPPONENTS ARE WORTHY CANDIDATES, BUT THE FACT IS THAT THEY'RE IGNORING THE GREATEST THREAT TO PERSPECTA THAT ANY OF US HAVE EVER SEEN.
OH? AND WHAT THREAT IS THAT, PRAY TELL?
HUMANS.
YOU CAN LAUGH NOW, BUT THE HUMANS HAVE BEEN HERE. HERE, ON PERSPECTA.
WE'VE ALL HEARD THE RUMORS: SIX MONTHS AGO, A LONE HUMAN MADE HIS WAY TO PERSPECTA. WELL, THIS IS TRUE, AND...
HA HA HA HA HA HA
...AND IT'S JUST THE START, MY FRIENDS.

THEY KNOW ABOUT US NOW, AND THEY'LL BE BACK. WE ALL KNOW HOW PRIMITIVE AND WARLIKE THE HUMANS CAN BE, EVEN WITH US GUIDING THEM. THEY SAY THEY WANT A GOD BUT HOW DO YOU THINK THEY'LL FEEL WHEN THEY LEARN THAT THE FORCES GUIDING THEM THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY HAVE BEEN...
...US.
HOW DO YOU THINK THEY'LL FEEL KNOWING THAT THEY'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO EXERCISE THEIR OWN FREE WILL? THAT THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY WE'VE BEEN PUSHING THEM ALONG?
THEY'LL REBEL. SWIFTLY, ANGRILY. THEY'LL BRING THEIR HORRIFYING WEAPONS, THEIR SHOCK AND AWE, THEIR GUERILLA WARFARE, AND WE'LL BE SITTING DUCKS. AND I HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT AN ATTACK IS IMMINENT. LET ME REPEAT THAT: AN ATTACK IS IMMINENT. THEY'RE PLANNING THE INVASION EVEN NOW.
WHAT, YOU DOUBT ME? YOU DOUBT THAT THE HUMANS COULD HIDE THEIR WAR PLANNING FROM US?
AT YOUR PERIL, MY FRIENDS. WHEN IT COMES TO WAR, TO HATRED, TO DECEPTION AND SUBTERFUGE, THE HUMANS HAVE NO EQUALS. AND SO, I SAY TO YOU THAT ALL OF THE PRECIOUS LITTLE THINGS THAT MY OPPONENTS HAVE BEEN ARGUING ABOUT TODAY MAY SOON BECOME ENTIRELY IRRELEVANT.
THIS RACE ISN'T ABOUT INTEGRATION, OR HEALTH CARE, OR EDUCATION, OR ANY OF THOSE MUNDANE THINGS. NONE OF THAT WILL MATTER ONCE THE HUMANS ARRIVE. THIS RACE IS ABOUT SECURITY; ABOUT STOPPING TERRORISM; ABOUT PROTECTING OUR HOMELAND FROM IMMINENT DESTRUCTION. WHY AREN'T MY OPPONENTS TALKING ABOUT THIS?
BECAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE THE STRENGTH, THE POWER, THAT IT TAKES TO STAND UP TO THE HUMAN THREAT. TO PROTECT OUR WORLD. TO DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO SAVE OUR CHILDREN, OUR FAMILIES, OUR ENTIRE WAY OF LIE... ER, LIFE.
CONSECROUS IS TOO WEAK TO STAND UP TO THE HUMANS; DEPRAVENOUS, TOO WILD AND UNDISCIPLINED.
ONLY IN ME, YES, IN A HALF-BREED, DO YOU HAVE THE PERFECT, BALANCED COMBINATION OF WISDOM AND INSIGHT, ON THE ONE HAND, AND WILD, RAW, UNPREDICTABLE FORCE, ON THE OTHER HAND, NECESSARY TO OUTWIT, OUTSMART AND OVERPOWER THE HUMAN THREAT. TO PROTECT US ALL. TO THOSE OF US HERE, AND TO ALL PERSPECTANS, I SAY THIS: IF YOU TRULY LOVE THIS WORLD, YOUR WORLD; IF YOU TRULY LOVE YOUR CHILDREN... YOU'LL JOIN WITH ME AND STAND UP TO ALL THOSE WHO WOULD PLACE PERSPECTA AT RISK. THANK YOU, GOOD NIGHT... AND MAY THE ELDERS BLESS PERSPECTA.
BRILLIANT. NOW THIS IS A RACE!
#$%* YOU.
CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP


...AND NOW SHE WAS ASHAMED NOT ONLY OF WHAT SHE HAD JUST DONE, BUT ALSO BY HOW MUCH THE CROWD SEEMED TO LOVE HER FOR IT.
DID SHE GET PUNISHED?
OH, ABSOLUTELY. BUT, HERE'S THE THING ABOUT LIES, HONEY. EVEN WHEN YOU SEEM TO GET AWAY WITH THEM AT FIRST, THE LIE ITSELF CAN STAY WITH YOU, AND COME BACK TO PUNISH YOU WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT.
HUH?
WELL, WITH EMBER, HER LIE WAS EATING HER UP INSIDE, AND SHE WAS ALL CONFUSED, AND CONFLICTED, AND SOOOO ANGRY WITH HERSELF. YOU KNOW HOW SOMETIMES YOU GET SO FRUSTRATED THAT YOU JUST CAN'T CONTROL YOUR LITTLE SELF? HOW YOU KICK AND SCREAM AND FIGHT WITH MOMMY AND DADDY? WELL...

YOU'VE ACTUALLY GOT COUNCIL MEMBERS TALKING ABOUT PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKES AGAINST THE EARTH!
ABOUT ATTACKING THE VERY RACE THAT WE'RE SWORN TO GUIDE AND PROTECT!
I DON'T CARE HOW MUCH GOOD YOU COULD, CONCEIVABLY, DO IN OFFICE. I CAN'T BE A PART OF THIS ANY MORE. I'M GOING TO THE PRESS.
YOU CAN'T!
EMBER... KILL HIM.
OF COURSE I CAN! EMBER, YOU'RE BETTER THAN THIS. WE'RE BETTER THAN THIS. AS A CAMPAIGN. AS ELYSIANS. AS PERSPECTANS. I'M GOING TO END IT.
WHAT?! I'M NOT A--
EMBER, AGAIN, IT'S ONE LIFE, VERSUS ALL THE LIVES YOU CAN HELP MAKE BETTER. YOU CAN WIN THIS RACE AND CHANGE THE WORLD! IT'S A WORTHWHILE TRADE-OFF, YOU HAVE TO--
EMBER, DON'T DO THIS! ONCE YOU GO DOWN THIS PATH YOU'LL NEVER--
DO IT! STOP HIM BEFORE HE DESTROYS ALL WE'VE--

DON'T WORRY. YOU'RE NOT A *REAL* POLITICIAN UNTIL YOU'VE KILLED SOMEONE. MOST POLITICIANS DO IT BY DECLARING WAR, OR INITIATING COVERT OPERATIONS. YOU'VE JUST DONE IT A BIT MORE ... DIRECTLY. COME ON, LET'S GO.

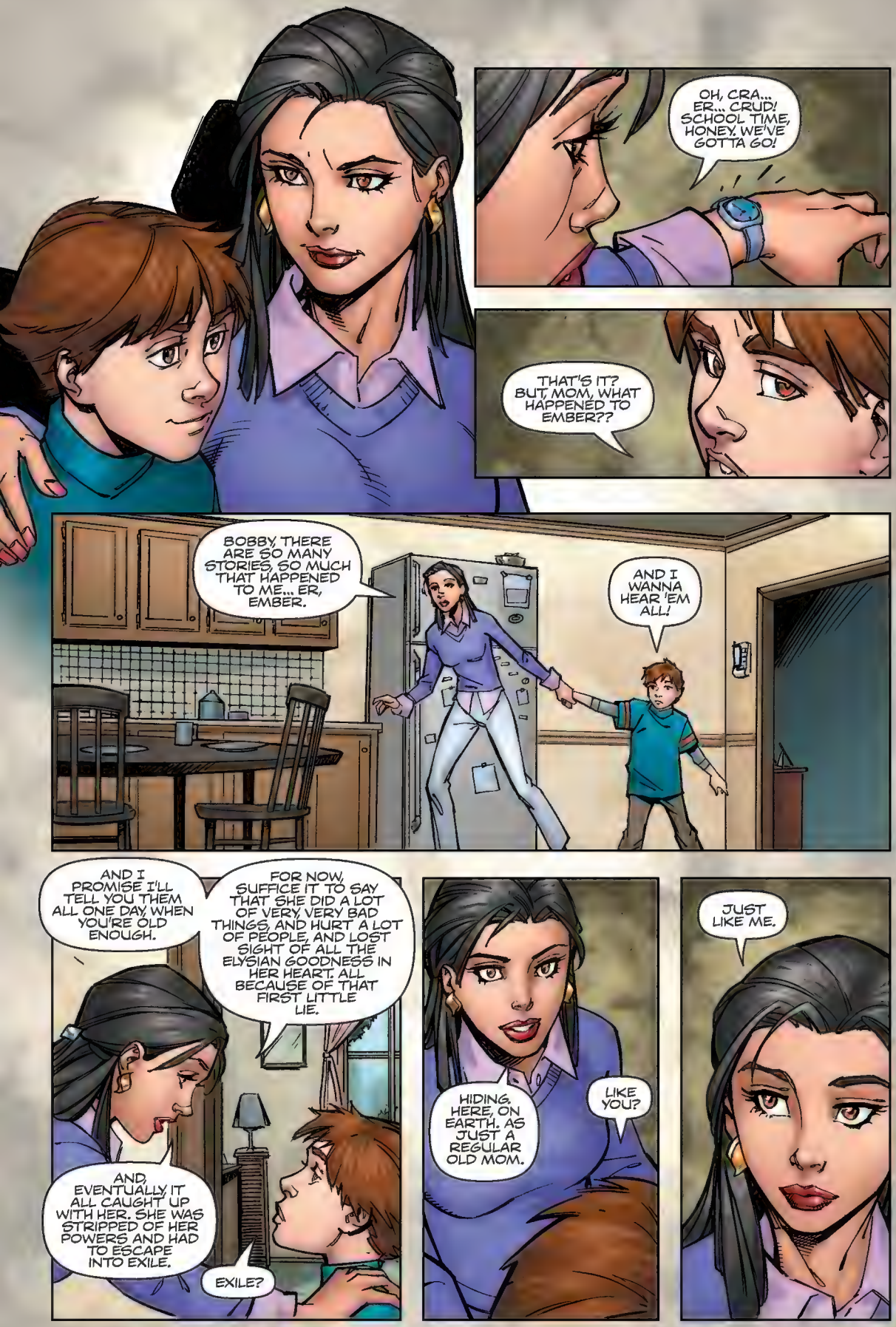
HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A CONTENDER AGAIN?
YOU'RE NOW IN A DEAD HEAT IN THE POLLS, CAN YOU COMMENT?
HOW DID YOU ENGINEER THIS AMAZING COMEBACK?
HOW DO YOU PLAN TO STOP THE HUMANS FROM ATTACKING US?
EMBER
EMBER
UNITY
PROTECT PERSPECTA
NO
BREEDS!

BACK OFF, ELYSIAN!
OUT OF THE WAY!
EMBER IS THE WORD.
LIES. ALL LIES!
BACK OFF!

LOOK AT THESE PERSPECTANS, EMBER. THEY NEED A LEADER. THEY NEED STRENGTH!
SHOW THEM, EMBER. SHOW THEM HOW STRONG YOU CAN BE.
UNITE PERSPECTA UNDER ONE, MERCILESS RULE!
THEY SAY THAT IF YOU HOLD IN A LIE FOR LONG ENOUGH, EVENTUALLY...

...YOU'LL BURST.

SHE'S GOT MY VOTE!
WOW!
THAT WAS AMAZING!
SHE'S HOT!
SHE REALLY IS TOUGH, THAT'S WHAT I CARE ABOUT!
SHE'LL PROTECT US FROM THE HUMANS!


OH, CRA... ER... CRUD! SCHOOL TIME, HONEY. WE'VE GOTTA GO!
THAT'S IT? BUT, MOM, WHAT HAPPENED TO EMBER??
BOBBY, THERE ARE SO MANY STORIES, SO MUCH THAT HAPPENED TO ME... ER, EMBER.
AND I WANNA HEAR 'EM ALL!
AND I PROMISE I'LL TELL YOU THEM ALL ONE DAY, WHEN YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH.
FOR NOW, SUFFICE IT TO SAY THAT SHE DID A LOT OF VERY, VERY BAD THINGS, AND HURT A LOT OF PEOPLE, AND LOST SIGHT OF ALL THE ELYSIAN GOODNESS IN HER HEART. ALL BECAUSE OF THAT FIRST LITTLE LIE.
AND, EVENTUALLY, IT ALL CAUGHT UP WITH HER. SHE WAS STRIPPED OF HER POWERS AND HAD TO ESCAPE INTO EXILE.
EXILE?
HIDING. HERE, ON EARTH. AS JUST A REGULAR OLD MOM.
LIKE YOU?
JUST LIKE ME.

WOW. THAT SUCKS.
NO, IT'S ACTUALLY THE BEST THING THAT EVER COULD'VE HAPPENED TO HER.
GO GET YOUR LUNCH BOX.

AND SHE PRAYS EVERY MORNING THAT THE PERSPECTANS NEVER FIND HER. BECAUSE IF THEY DID? IF THEY EVER THREATENED HER FAMILY? IF HER OLD BAD CHOICES END UP COSTING HER EVEN MORE THAN THEY ALREADY HAVE?
WELL...
COME ON, MOM!
END?

ASPEN SHOWCASE

Marc ANDREYKO Scott CLARK Bob SOTELO

KIANI

#1

aspen comics

ASPEN SHOWCASE

Marc ANDREYKO Scott CLARK Beth SOTELO

KIANI

#1

aspen comics

Kiani

Writer:
MARC ANDREYKO

Illustrations:
SCOTT CLARK

Colors:
BETH SOTELO

Letters:
JOSH REED

ASPEN SHOWCASE

Cover A:
SCOTT CLARK
BETH SOTELO

Cover B:
TALENT CALDWELL

Cover C:
ASPENSTORE.COM
EXCLUSIVE
EDITION OF 500
ALE GARZA
PETER STEIGERWALD

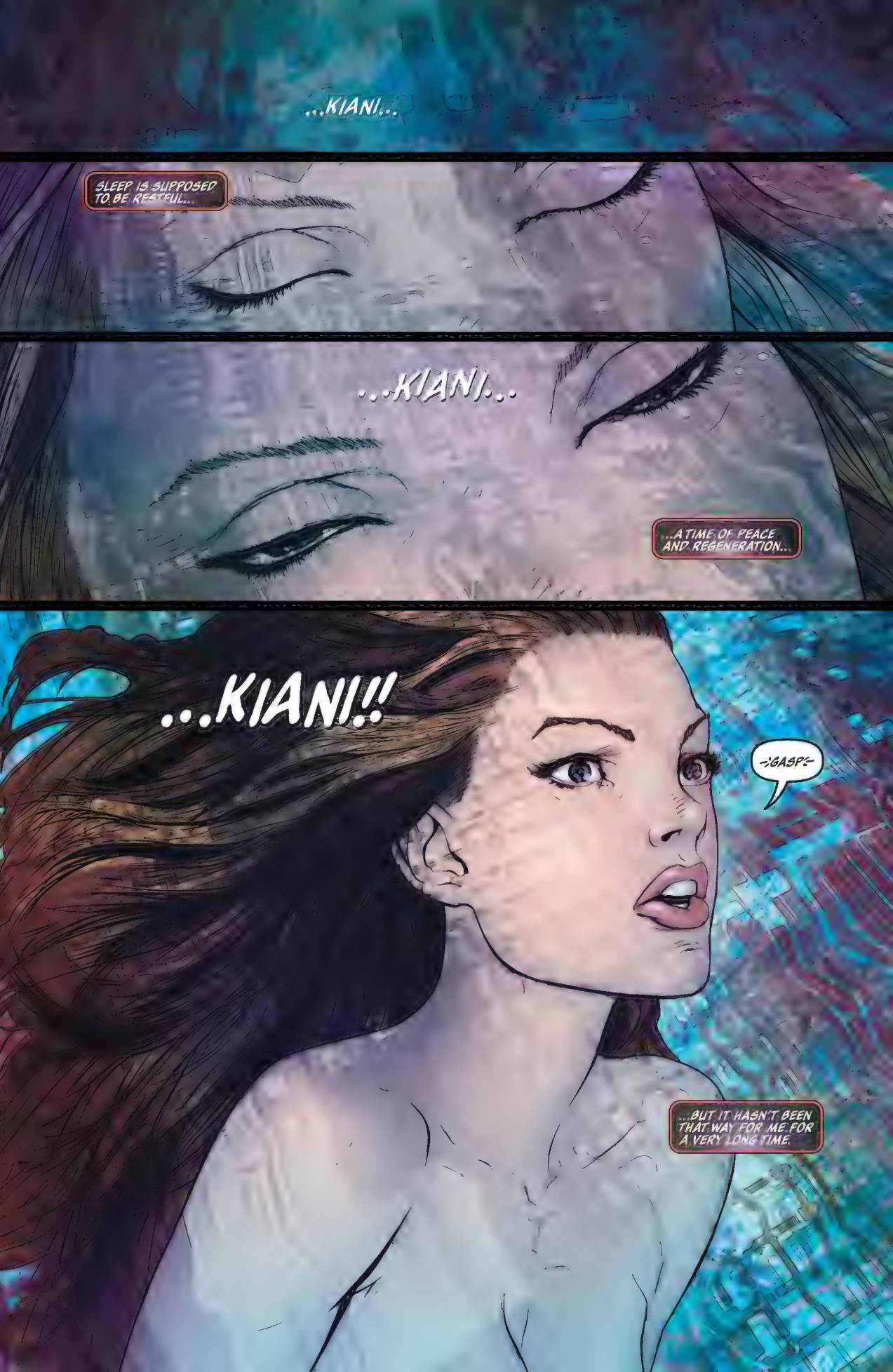
FOR ASPEN: FOUNDER: MICHAEL TURNER · CO-OWNER: PETER STEIGERWALD · CO-OWNER/PRESIDENT: FRANK MASTROMAURO
VICE PRESIDENT/EDITOR IN CHIEF: VINCE HERNANDEZ · VICE PRESIDENT/DESIGN AND PRODUCTION: MARK ROSLAN
EDITOR: GABE CARRASCO · OFFICE MANAGER: MEGAN MADRIGAL · EDITORIAL INTERNS: MEXI GRAMILLION · PRODUCTION: JUSTICE · ASPENSTORE.COM: CHRIS RUPP

EDITOR: VINCE HERNANDEZ, LIMBER UP: CHRIS RUPP, DESIGN AND PRODUCTION: MARK ROSLAN WITH PETER STEIGERWALD

FATHOM CREATED BY: MICHAEL TURNER, ORIGINAL LETTERING FONT BY: DREAMER DESIGN

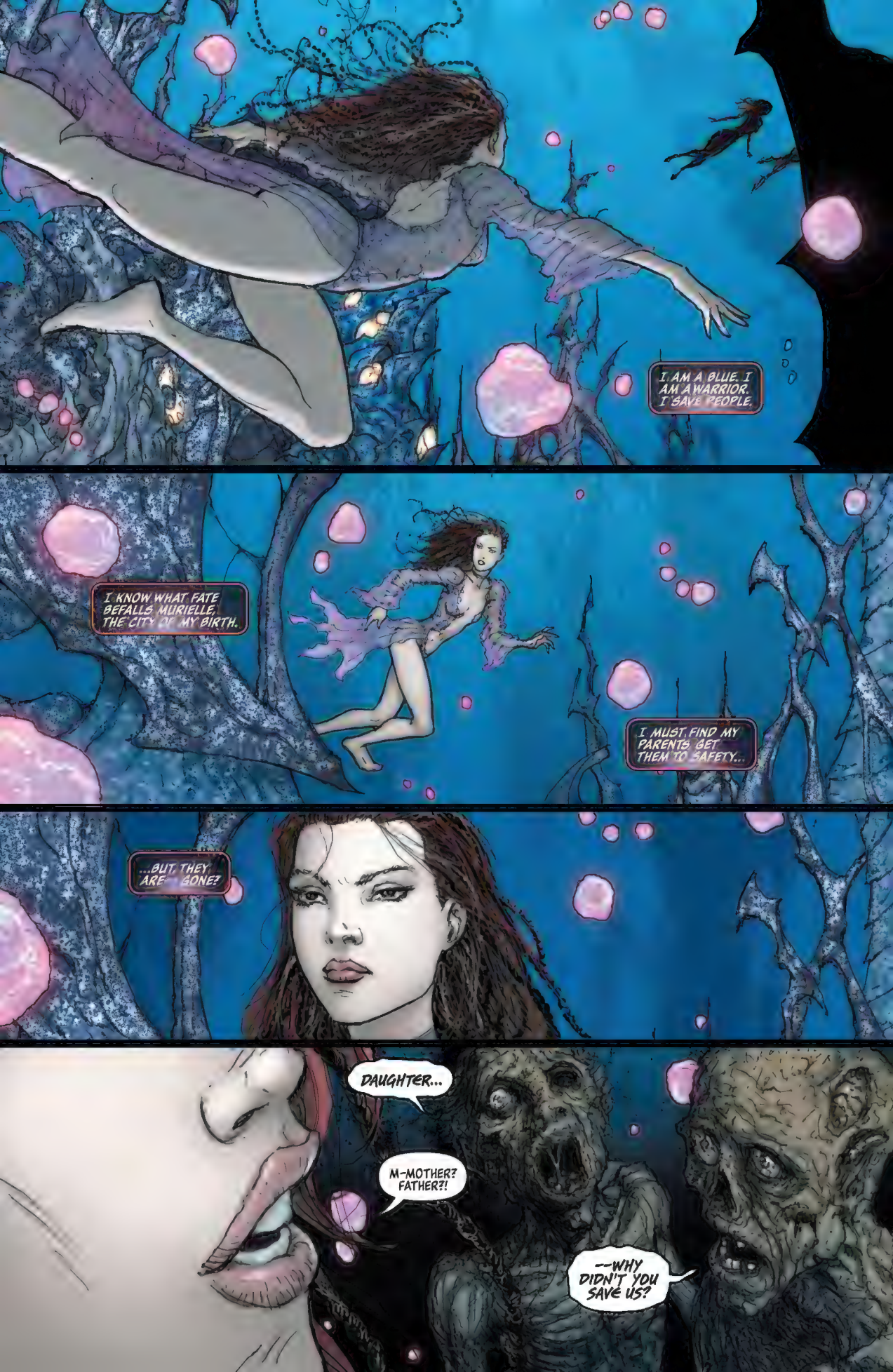
ASPEN SHOWCASE: KIANI Vol. 1 Issue 2 APRIL 2017 DIGITAL COPY Published by Aspen MLT Inc. Office of Publication: 5701 W. Slauson Ave. Suite 120 Culver City, CA 90230.
The Aspen MLT Inc. logo® is a registered trademark of Aspen MLT Inc. Aspen Showcase™ and the Aspen Showcase logo are the trademarks of Aspen MLT Inc. The entire contents of this book, all artwork, characters and their likenesses are © 2017 Aspen MLT Inc. All Rights Reserved. Any similarities between names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with persons living or dead or institutions is unintended and is purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted, reproduced or transmitted by any means or in any form without the express written consent of Aspen MLT Inc.

VISIT US ON THE WEB AT WWW.ASPENCOMICS.COM


...KIANI...
SLEEP IS SUPPOSED TO BE RESTFUL...
...KIANI...
...A TIME OF PEACE AND REGENERATION...
...KIANI!!
-:GASP:-
...BUT IT HASN'T BEEN THAT WAY FOR ME FOR A VERY LONG TIME.

UNDER THE SURFACE
I SEE MYSELF AS THE PLAYFUL CHILD I NEVER GOT TO BE.
-:GIGGLE:- C'MON!
IN THE CITY THAT I'VE ONLY KNOWN AFTER ITS DESTRUCTION.

I HOPE BEYOND HOPE THAT THIS IS NO DREAM. THAT MY ADULT LIFE HAS BEEN NOTHING BUT THE NIGHT-TERRORS THAT FRIGHTEN CHILDREN IN THEIR BEDS.
KIAN!! OVER HERE!
YOU'RE A BIG GIRL, DAUGHTER! YOU'VE GOT TO KEEP UP!
HAHAHAHA! I CAN CATCH YOU! I CAN!


I AM A BLUE. I AM A WARRIOR. I SAVE PEOPLE.
I KNOW WHAT FATE BEFALLS MURIELLE, THE CITY OF MY BIRTH.
I MUST FIND MY PARENTS GET THEM TO SAFETY...
...BUT THEY ARE GONE?
DAUGHTER...
M-MOTHER? FATHER?!
--WHY DIDN'T YOU SAVE US?

I-- I-- N-NO...! GET BACK!
YOU?
KIANI.
WHY?
DIDN'T?
KIANI.
DIDN'T?
WHY?
US?
SAVE?
ME?
SAVE?
ME?
YOU?
US?
KIANI.
SAVE?
US?
KIANI.
ME?
YOU?
US?
WHY?
DIDN'T?
THE VOICES OF THE DEAD ECHO THROUGH MY SKULL. LOUDER. LOUDER. DEAFENING ME. PREVENTING ME FROM STOPPING WHAT I KNOW I NEVER CAN.
DIDN'T?
WHY?
SAVE?
ME?
KIANI.
YOU?

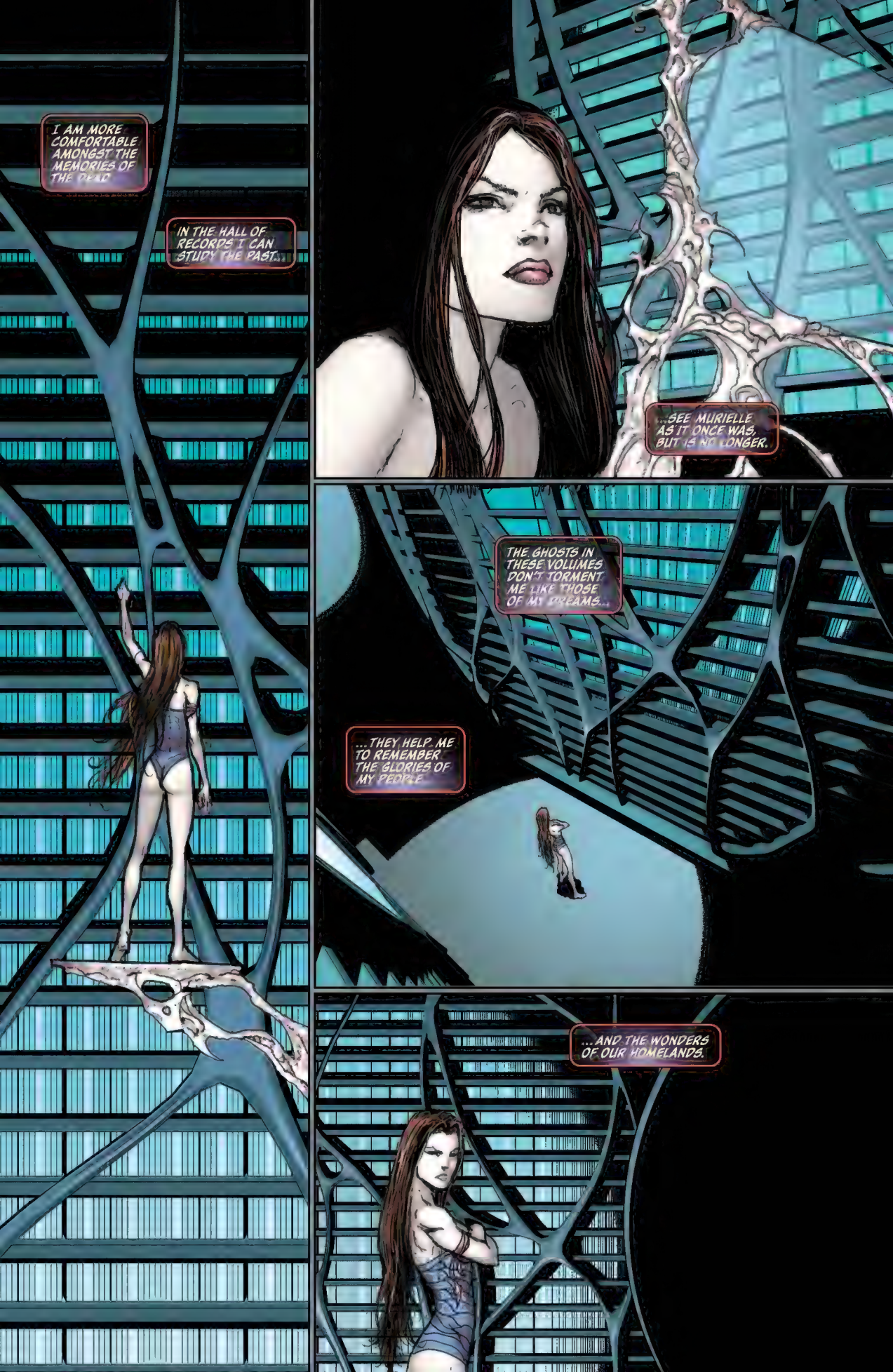
STOP! I CAN'T...!
BOOM
THE DESTRUCTION OF MURIELLE. THE DEATHS OF MY MOTHER, MY FATHER, THOUSANDS OF MY PEOPLE.

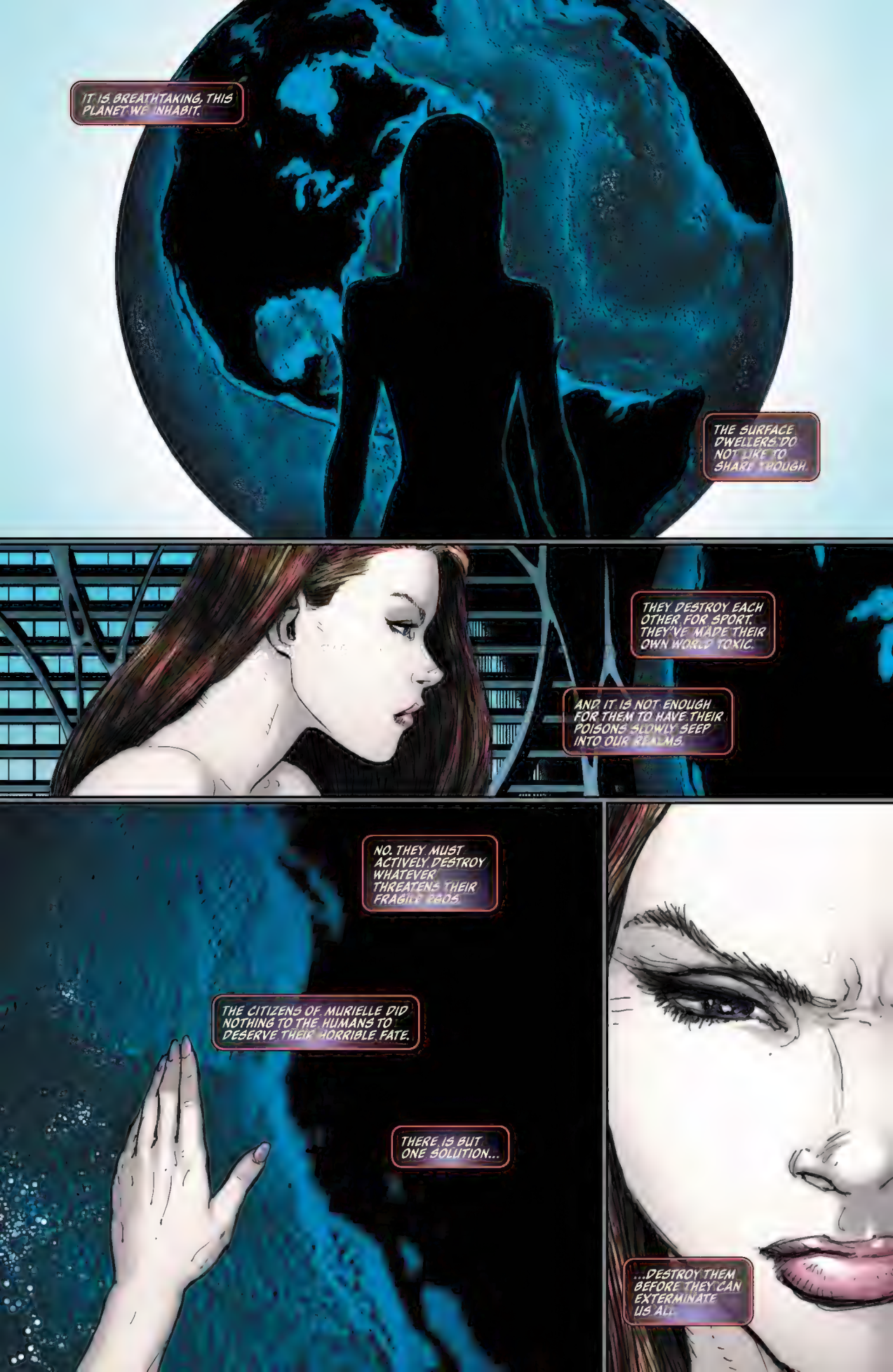
...N-NO... NOT AGAIN...

ANOTHER NIGHTMARE. THEY ARE ALMOST BECOMING ROUTINE.
SOMEONE IS HERE. WATCHING ME.
THEY WILL REGRET THIS UNEXPECTED VISIT.
YOU THINK YOU CAN SURPRISE ME? IN MY OWN BARRACKS?
THINK AGAIN.
YOU CHOSE THE WRONG WARRIOR TO ATTACK, SO TELL ME--
AAAHHHH!

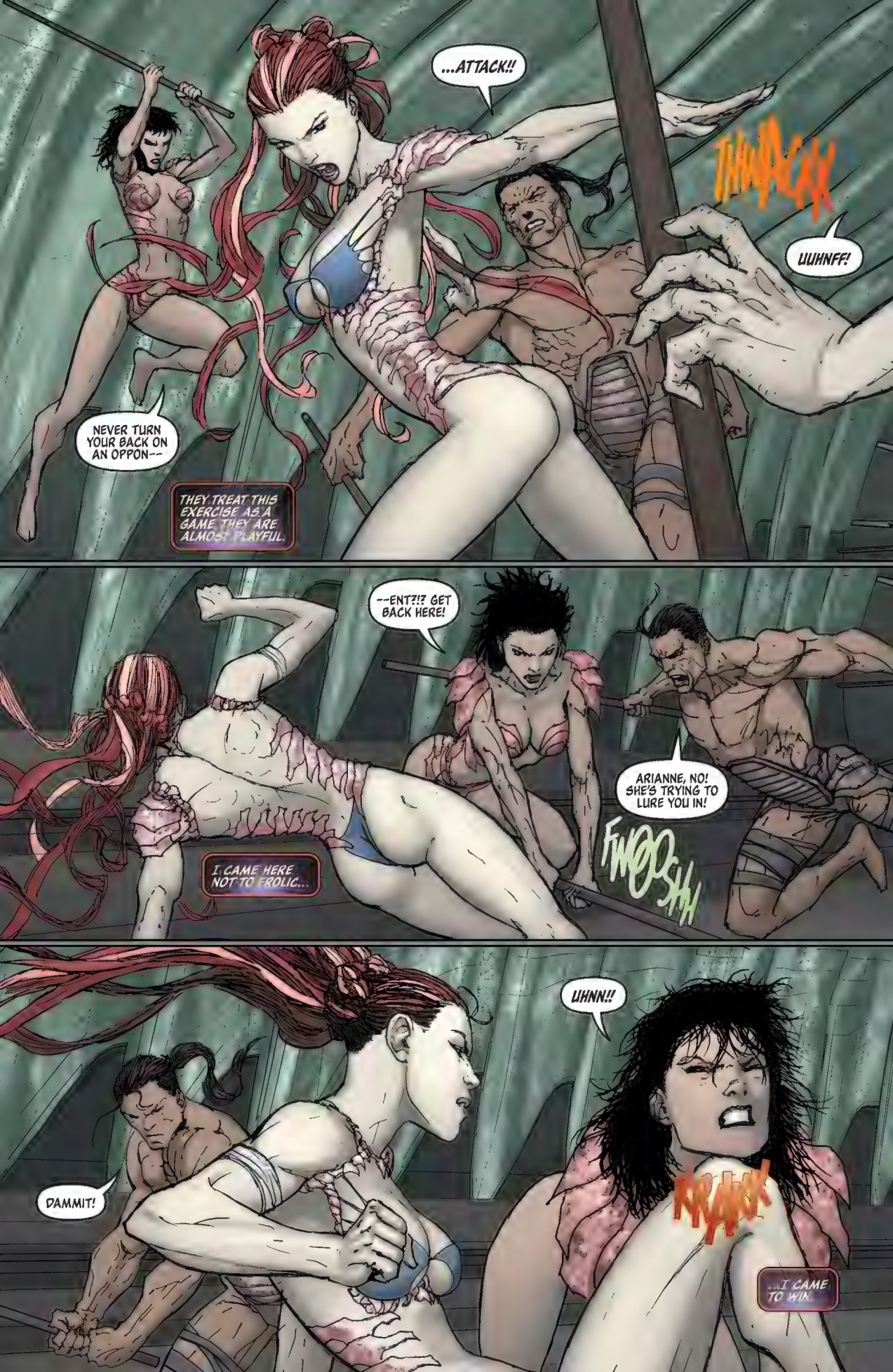
--WHY SHOULDN'T I GUT YOU NAVEL-TO- NECK?
THEN WHO WOULD TEACH YOU AND THE OTHER CADETS?
CASQUE?!? I-- I--
--WOULD BE A MUCH MORE PERCEPTIVE FIGHTER IF YOU WEREN'T SO FUELED BY RAGE.
BUT, IT SEEMS YOU'RE THE ONE OVERPOWERED BY... ME?
STRENGTH IS NO GUARANTEE. WITH BUT A FLICK OF MY WRIST, I COULD HAVE YOU BLEEDING OUT IN SECONDS.

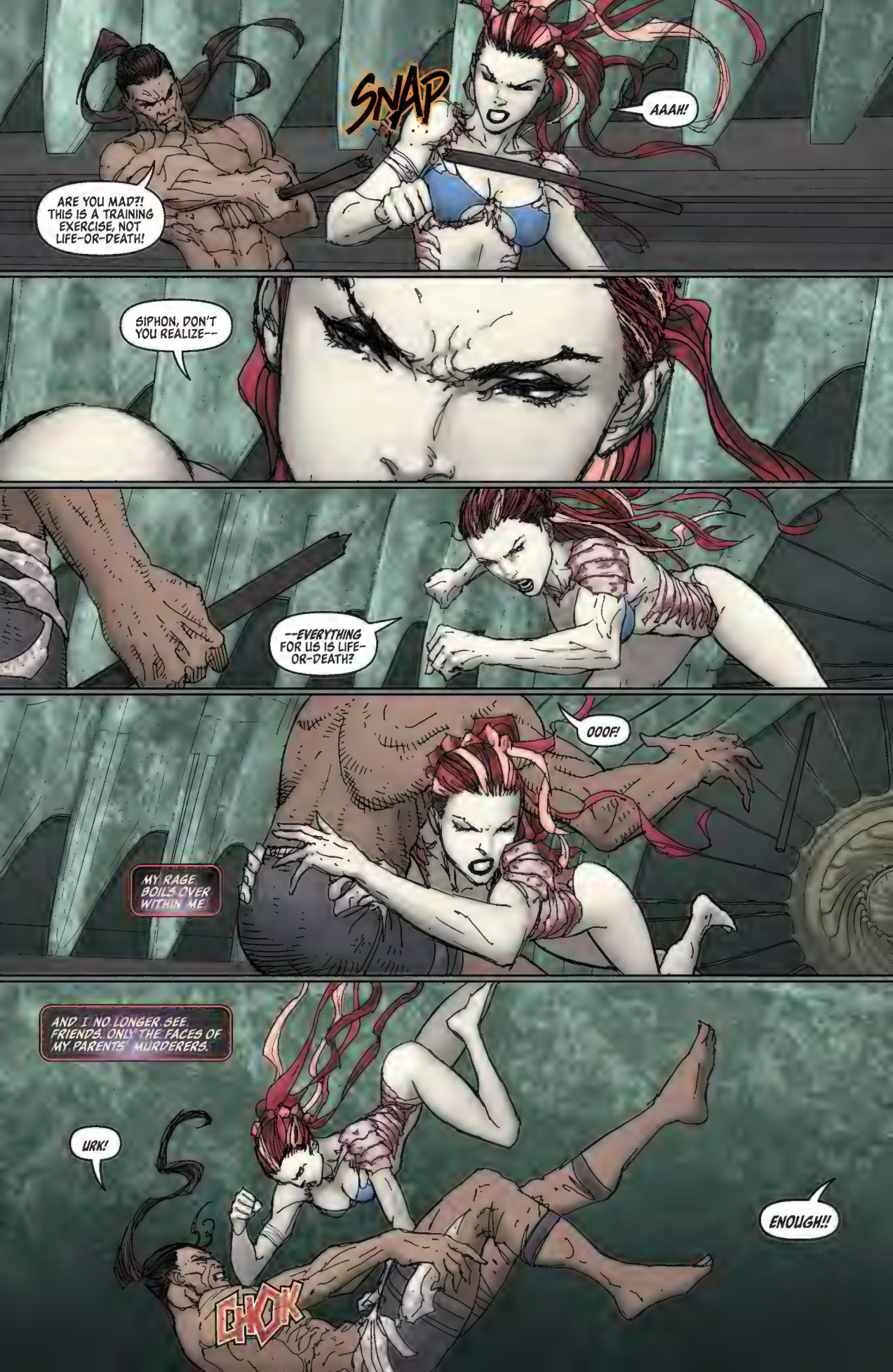
I HATE THESE SURPRISE DRILLS.
YOU ARE RIGHT, AS ALWAYS, CASQUE. I AM SORRY.
DON'T BE SORRY, KIANI. BE AWARE. OF EVERYTHING AROUND YOU. PASSIONS MAY STOKE THE FIRES OF BATTLE, BUT YOU MUST LEARN TO CONTROL THEM OR BE CONSUMED YOURSELF.
PRECISION IN COMBAT IS MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE THAN WHOLESALE DESTRUCTION.
TELL THAT TO MY PARENTS.
WHAT WAS THAT?
NOTHING... SIR.
HERE WE GO AGAIN.
ALL OF YOU: BACK TO BED. YOU HAVE A TOUGH DAY AHEAD OF YOU. TOUGHER NOW, THANKS TO KIANI.
WHY DO YOU KEEP DOING THAT? WE AREN'T THE ENEMY.
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, SIPHON. DON'T EVEN TRY.
WE'VE ALL LOST LOVED ONES, KIANI.
DON'T FORSAKE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LIVING FOR THOSE WITH THE DEAD.
HE'S RIGHT, OF COURSE, BUT, DAMN ME FOR BEING TOO PROUD TO LET HIM KNOW THAT.


I AM MORE COMFORTABLE AMONGST THE MEMORIES OF THE DEAD
IN THE HALL OF RECORDS I CAN STUDY THE PAST...
...SEE MURIELLE AS IT ONCE WAS, BUT IS NO LONGER.
THE GHOSTS IN THESE VOLUMES DON'T TORMENT ME LIKE THOSE OF MY DREAMS...
...THEY HELP ME TO REMEMBER THE GLORIES OF MY PEOPLE
...AND THE WONDERS OF OUR HOMELANDS.


IT IS BREATHTAKING, THIS PLANET WE INHABIT.
THE SURFACE DWELLERS DO NOT LIKE TO SHARE THOUGH.
THEY DESTROY EACH OTHER FOR SPORT. THEY'VE MADE THEIR OWN WORLD TOXIC.
AND IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR THEM TO HAVE THEIR POISONS SLOWLY SEEP INTO OUR REALMS.
NO. THEY MUST ACTIVELY DESTROY WHATEVER THREATENS THEIR FRAGILE EGOS.
THE CITIZENS OF MURIELLE DID NOTHING TO THE HUMANS TO DESERVE THEIR HORRIBLE FATE.
THERE IS BUT ONE SOLUTION...
...DESTROY THEM BEFORE THEY CAN EXTERMINATE US ALL.

KEEP YOUR LEFT ARM UP, SIPHON! YOU'RE LEAVING YOURSELF OPEN!
YES, SIR!
BRANDE, ENOUGH WITH THE POSING! THIS IS ARMED COMBAT, NOT A COURTSHIP DANCE!
-SIGH-
ARE WE BORING YOU, KIANI?
NO, SIR! MY MIND WANDERED AND--
PERHAPS SHOWING US HOW AN UNARMED SOLDIER CAN TAKE DOWN THREE ARMED OPPONENTS WILL KEEP YOUR ATTENTION.
OH... MY PLEASURE.
DON'T WORRY, KIANI. WE WON'T HURT YOU TOO MUCH!
I'M NOT THE ONES WHO SHOULD WORRY.
ALRIGHT, THEN...


...ATTACK!!
THWACKK
UUHNFF!
NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON AN OPPON--
THEY TREAT THIS EXERCISE AS A GAME. THEY ARE ALMOST PLAYFUL.
--ENT?!? GET BACK HERE!
ARIANNE, NO! SHE'S TRYING TO LURE YOU IN!
FWOOSHH
I CAME HERE NOT TO FROLIC...
UHNN!!
DAMMIT!
I CAME TO WIN.


SNAP
AAAH!
ARE YOU MAD?! THIS IS A TRAINING EXERCISE, NOT LIFE-OR-DEATH!
SIPHON, DON'T YOU REALIZE--
--EVERYTHING FOR US IS LIFE-OR-DEATH?
OOOF!
MY RAGE BOILS OVER WITHIN ME
AND I NO LONGER SEE FRIENDS. ONLY THE FACES OF MY PARENTS' MURDERERS.
URK!
ENOUGH!!
BKOK

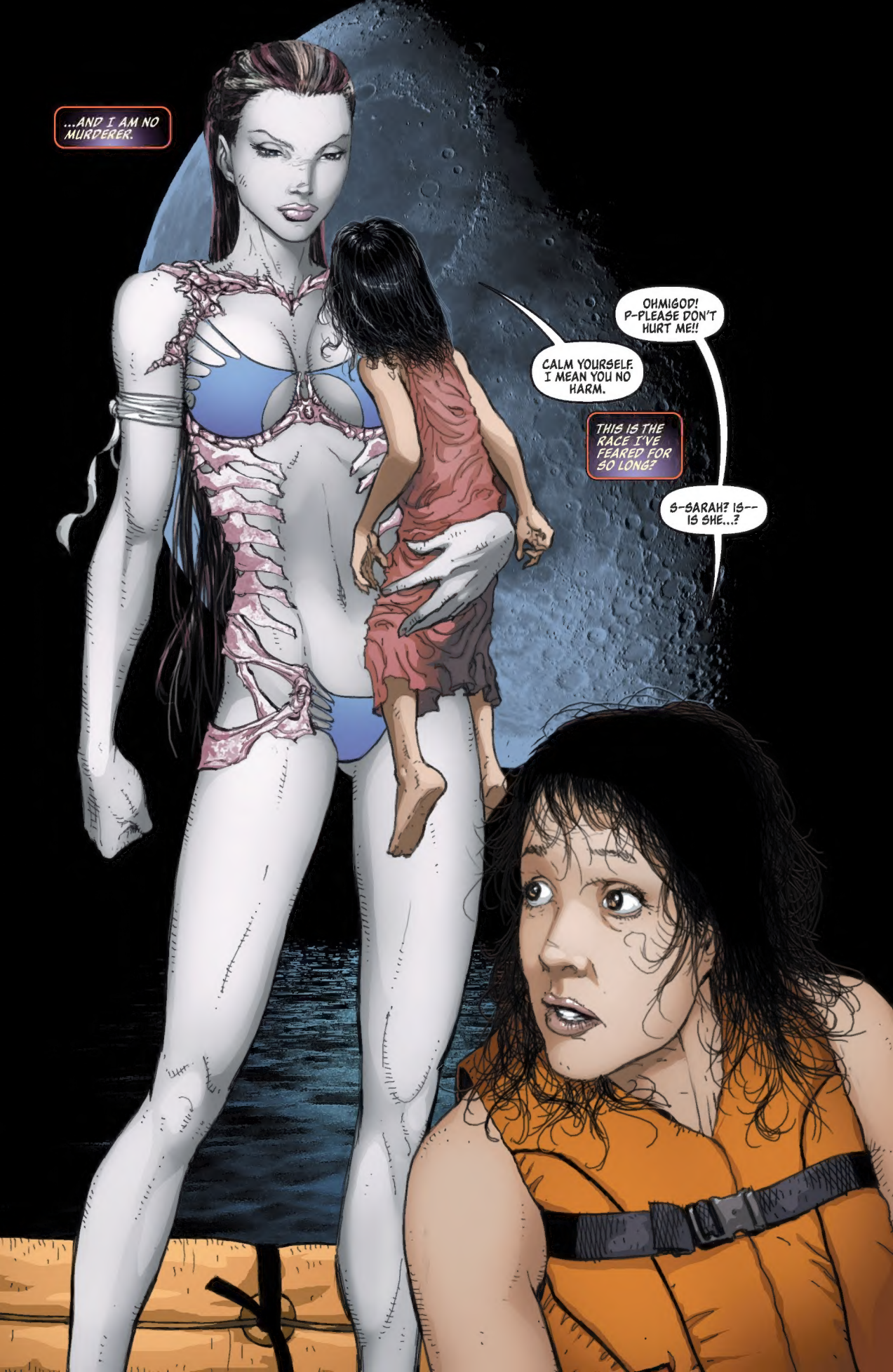
AND, IN AN INSTANT, I AM BROUGHT BACK TO MY REALITY.
WE ARE DONE FOR TODAY. SIPHON, BRANDE, ARIANNE, YOU ARE DISMISSED.
AND WHAT OF ME, SIR?
SHOWOFF.
WHAT OF YOU, KIANI...?
Y-YES -;COUGH, COUGH;- SIR.
UHHHH...

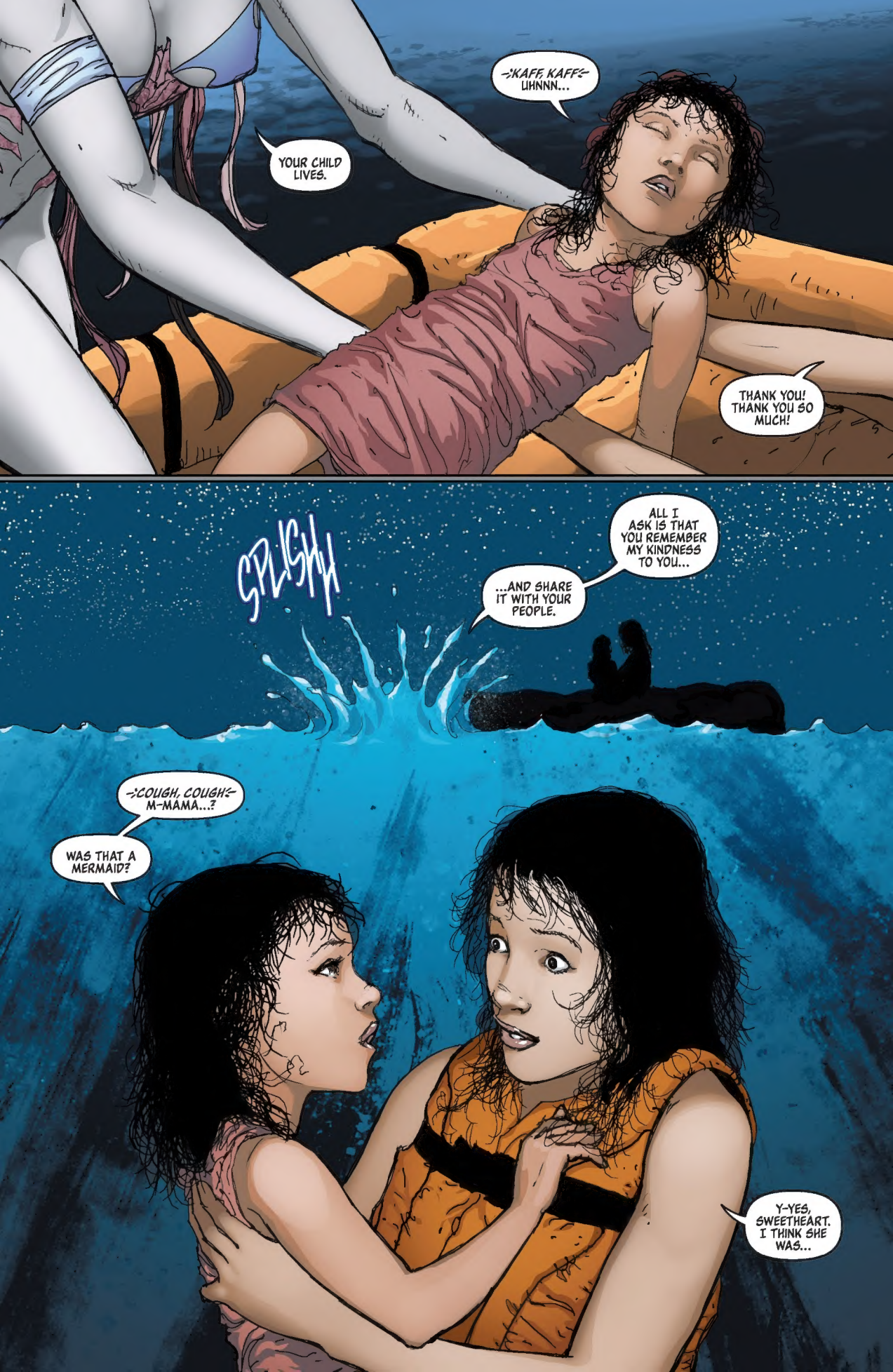
...THAT IS A QUESTION THAT CONTINUALLY GNAWS AT ME.
I KNOW YOU MAY FEEL THAT I AM SINGLING YOU OUT, AND, PERHAPS I AM. BUT I KNOW YOU CAN BE BETTER THAN THIS. YOU HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO BE THE *VERY BEST* OF US.
I COMPLETED THE TASK YOU GAVE ME, DIDN'T I?
YOUR PAIN IS YOUR GREATEST ASSET *AND* YOUR GREATEST WEAKNESS. EVERY LIFE COLLECTS ITS OWN TRAGEDIES, BUT YOU WEAR YOURS ON YOUR SLEEVE.
CASQUE, YOU DON'T--
YES, I DO. I KNEW YOUR PARENTS, KIANI. I MOURN THEIR FATES AS WELL. DO YOU THINK THEY WANT YOU TO BE CONSUMED BY YOUR ANGER? THAT YOU ARE DISHONORING THEIR MEMORY IF YOU ALLOW THIS WOUND IN YOUR HEART TO SCAR OVER?
LIFE IS A GIFT, KIANI. WE MUST PREPARE FOR THE BAD TIMES, BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF APPRECIATING AND ENJOYING WHAT WE HAVE. THERE IS NO SHAME IN THAT. NOW, GO. FIND YOUR CLASSMATES. TRY TO EXPERIENCE SOMETHING OTHER THAN ANGER.
THAT IS AN ORDER, CADET.

CASQUE'S USE OF THE WORD "CLASSMATES" INSTEAD OF "FRIENDS" DID NOT GO UNNOTICED.
I CAN'T BLAME THEM IF THEY WITHDRAW THEIR FRIENDSHIP. IT IS THE LEAST I DESERVE.
I CANNOT REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I LAUGHED OUT LOUD..
...OR HAD A PEACEFUL, DREAMLESS NIGHT'S SLEEP.
I WANT TO LET MY ANGER GO, BUT IF I DO—
BOOM
A HUMAN VESSEL?! IS IT FIRING UPON ME...?

NO. IT DOESN'T KNOW I'M HERE. IT SEEMS THEIR TECHNOLOGY HAS FAILED THEM.
HELP! SOMEBODY! MY BABY...!
YOUR CRIES FALL ON DEAF EARS, WOMAN. YOU HUMANS HAVE NEVER SHOWN MY PEOPLE ANY MERCY AND
A CHILD?
I SHOULD LET THE DEPTHS HAVE YOU...

...LET YOUR PARENTS KNOW THE EMPTINESS THAT IS ALWAYS THERE...
NATE, WAKE UP! PLEASE! SARAH FELL IN!! OHMIGODOHMIGOD...!
SPLAAGH
...BUT THIS CHILD IS AN INNOCENT...
AAAAAH!


...AND I AM NO MURDERER.
CALM YOURSELF. I MEAN YOU NO HARM.
OHMIGOD! P-PLEASE DON'T HURT ME!!
THIS IS THE RACE I'VE FEARED FOR SO LONG?
S-SARAH? IS-- IS SHE...?


-:KAFF, KAFF:-
UHNNN...
YOUR CHILD LIVES.
THANK YOU! THANK YOU SO MUCH!
SPLISH!
ALL I ASK IS THAT YOU REMEMBER MY KINDNESS TO YOU...
...AND SHARE IT WITH YOUR PEOPLE.
-:COUGH, COUGH:-
M-MAMA...?
WAS THAT A MERMAID?
Y-YES, SWEETHEART. I THINK SHE WAS...

SURVEYING THE RUINS THAT ARE THE GRAVEYARD OF SO MANY OF MY KIND, I QUESTION MY ACTIONS.

BY SAVING THAT LITTLE HUMAN GIRL, WAS I WEAK? DID I BETRAY WHAT I THOUGHT WAS MY LIFE'S PURPOSE?

AND IF I DON'T HOLD ALL HUMANS EQUALLY COMPLICIT IN MURIELLE'S DESTRUCTION...

...THEN WHO AM I?

IF I TAKE AWAY MY ANGER, WHAT REMAINS?

THE BEGINNING...